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Reappraising the Land: Patrick White's Landscape Legacy and its Afterlives

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Submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in December 2022

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I acknowledge and give sincere thanks to the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which I have written this thesis, as well as its waters and skies, the Bindal and Wulgurukaba people. It has been a privilege to spend time here. I pay my respects to Elders, past and present, and all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Sovereignty was never ceded. Settlers can and must do better.

The completion of this thesis was made possible by a series of tremendous supervisors, many of whom have attended to me and this thesis with a sense of care, duty, and intellectual rigour that is well outside their pay grade. Thank you. Associate Professor Victoria Kuttainen, Associate Professor Elizabeth Tynan, and Distinguished Professor Sean Ulm have been instrumental in seeing it through to submission.

I would also like to acknowledge The Association for the Study of Australian Literature (ASAL) for their ongoing support and the mentorship and kindness its members and board have shown me. Thank you especially to Julieanne Lamond, Emily Potter, and Monique Rooney. Your kindness and generosity of spirit were noticed and appreciated. I am similarly indebted to a tremendous postgraduate and ECR cohort both at James Cook University and through ASAL. Special mention must be given to Alice Bellette, Wayne Bradshaw, Nicole Crowe, Tianna Killoran, Janine Gertz, Jasmin Guenther, the Kuttainens, Emma Maguire, Tenille McDermott, Catherine Noske, and Patrick White (truly his name). I may have gone mad without you.

Finally, thanks must necessarily be paid to my family. My mum (from whom all other things have been made possible), the Burrows clan (shout out to our latest addition Harry for making me smile when I thought I couldn't), and Laura and Lisa for never giving up on me.

Statement of the Contribution of Others

Nature of Assistance	Contribution	Names, Titles *(if relevant)* and Affiliations of Co-Contributors
Intellectual support	Proposal writing Editorial assistance: Introduction-Chapter 2 Editorial assistance: Chapter 3-Conclusion	Professor Michael Ackland Associate Professor Allison Craven Associate Professor Victoria Kuttainen Associate Professor Elizabeth Tynan Distinguished Professor Sean Ulm
Financial support	Fee offset/waiver Research costs Stipend Write-up Grant	James Cook University Scholarship James Cook University Competitive Funding Schemes 2019-2022
Data collection	Research assistance Interview design and transcription Boat drivers	N/A

Abstract

The fiction of Patrick White reveals an ongoing preoccupation with Australian landscapes and the place of the individual within them. Much of the existing ecocritical literature in Australia favours a historical or theoretical methodology, often organised around a single type of environment, period, or philosophy. While these studies are important contributions to the field, a distinctly literary methodology has its own value: by proceeding from select texts and their reception, unique relationships between authors, narrative, and environments are centred. Furthermore, a close-reading methodology is especially constructive in established scholarly fields, such as Patrick White studies, where critical orthodoxies sometimes overpower the texts themselves.

Two facts underpin the importance of this study: Patrick White is the only Australian author to have won the Nobel Prize and literary studies is increasingly dedicated to an engagement with ecological crisis. Yet fundamental questions about the environments of Patrick White remain unanswered. Despite the impressive range of critical literature on the author, there is no dedicated study of his landscapes and no sustained analysis of their literary reverberations. This is a crucial oversight. Having established the environmental vision of White in the initial chapters, this study proceeds by bringing his landscapes into dialogue with the landscapes of other select and esteemed Australian authors, namely David Malouf and Alexis Wright.

Table of Contents

Chapter Summaries

Introduction: Depicting Australia—A Brief History

What is a landscape and why are Patrick White's landscapes important?

The introduction provides a survey of landscape in literature focusing on an Australian context and the emergence of Patrick White, the nation's first Nobel Laureate in Literature (1973). By offering an overview of the term landscape, its historical significance, and the conditions that shaped White's writing, his landscape legacy is introduced and contextualised.

Chapter 1: Ancient Lands, New Worlds—Patrick White's Early Landscapes

Was the landscape always central to Patrick White's fiction?

Tracing the development of visionary characters in Patrick White's fiction counters a prominent claim that the landscape was only a vital part of White's fiction upon his return to Australia after World War II. The Australian landscape was central to White's fiction even while he wrote in London. His first two novels, *Happy Valley* (1939) and *The Living and The Dead* (1941), are testaments to the author's longstanding orientation to Australian nature. For White, Australia was always an ancient land brimming with possibility, awaiting only an adequately awakened settler population. The problem of how characters might conceivably relate to a new land without significant ancestry was ameliorated by White's introduction of his first

visionary character in *The Aunt's Story* (1948). The barriers to connection were not in the ancient land but in its new arrivals. This was a key development, but it was primarily of characterisation, rather in White's depiction of the Australian environment.

Chapter 2: Inverted Wastelands—The Desert and the Suburb in Patrick White's Fiction

What are Patrick White's most significant landscapes?

White has explored almost every iconic Australian landscape, from the bush and desert through to the suburbs and sub-tropical islands of Queensland. Of these diverse and paradigmatic terrains, White's desert and suburb stand apart for their cultural influence. His depiction of these contrasting spaces was an important development in the history of Australian literature, and this is widely acknowledged in the secondary literature. There is limited study, however, of the material and planetary significance of *Voss*, and scant consideration of the relationship between his desert and urban landscapes. By tracing the desert of *Voss* (1957) through to the suburb in White's next novel, *Riders in the Chariot* (1961), the connection between a vital and resplendent desert and the barren cultural and spiritual centres of suburbia is revealed.

Chapter 3: White's Environmental Vision – Influence and Ambivalence in the Fiction of David Malouf

In which Australian author can we most readily see the influence of White's landscapes?

Patrick White's influence on David Malouf is widely acknowledged in the secondary literature, but this relationship is often observed in passing. Writing in the tradition of White and his Romantic forebears, Malouf foregrounds perception, exploration, and imaginative possession of the land, citing the same themes and even historical figures as White. Nonetheless, Malouf departs from White in one significant way: White's position on the rectitude of imaginative possession of the land was authoritative and unwavering, whereas Malouf's engagement is more ambivalent. There are expansive opportunities to connect to the land through vision and imagination across Malouf's fiction, but at times these connections prove to be mere "colonial fairytale" (*Remembering Babylon* 17). Such considerations add complexity to Malouf's landscapes, but for the most part the author still replicates ideations of the land that are fundamentally Western and colonial. Observing the many parallels to White throughout the author's oeuvre reveals some of the limits of the Nobel Laureate's vision of the land.

Chapter 4: Misread Wastelands – The Desert and Dump in Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* and Patrick White's Fiction

Through which Australian author are the limits of White's landscape legacy most apparent?

A recursive and comparative reading of the desert and dump in the fiction of Alexis Wright and Patrick White recontextualises White's landscape legacy. The desert and dump are significant national symbols, often drawn on to represent the continent as a barren wasteland or site of despoilment. In the fiction of Wright and White, however, the desert and dump are locales that highlight both the richness of the natural world

and its human mistreatment. Through a discussion of comparison, legacy, and waste in the desert and dump, this chapter foregrounds both the syncretism of White's and Wright's landscapes as well as their divisions. Such a reading delimits White's landscape legacy in clear ways, suggesting where its boundaries might be drawn.

Conclusion: Comparison and Legacy – What are We Doing when We Invoke Patrick White?

Considering the Australian canonisation of White, his influence on esteemed authors like Malouf, and the limits of this landscape tradition, how can scholars productively engage with White's legacy?

In addition to offering an overview of my argument and concluding statements, I address key directions for further study. The concluding chapter on Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* and its intersections with White's landscape legacy suggest the primacy of the land itself in both of their literary visions. But rather than using this ecological emphasis to circumvent crucial questions about settler invasion, refusals, and appropriation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, I propose further studies in Australian literature that investigate the distinct lenses that settler authors apply to the land.

Preface: On Being Wrong

I began this thesis expecting to address a simple gap in the field: the absence of a monograph on the landscapes of Patrick White. But as I wrote, I became concerned that my work and the material and environmental turn in literary studies more generally might be a way for white scholars like myself to at best ignore and at worst perpetuate the legacy of problematic white writers. Despite being routinely mistaken for an Australian tradition, White's terrains—and those of his successors—are relatively narrow in their cultural circumscription. It is a settler tradition, overwhelmingly (though not exclusively) adopted by white men. Patrick White is a complex writer with a complex legacy that is by turns racist, inclusive, elitist, compassionate, sexist, environmentally attuned, celebratory of the working class, and resistant to heteronormative strictures. His work will be studied in Australian schools and universities for some time yet, and Australian literature must develop a vocabulary for talking about White that makes space for the significance of his environmental vision alongside its limits.

The point for me has never been to prosecute or defend Patrick White, but to analyse and contextualise his landscapes. In this process, a distinct settler tradition of writing and celebrating Australian land—and often its most historically denigrated attributes—emerged. But as much as this legacy commemorates a natural world that was long considered a scourge on the nation, it represents the intractability of white-Indigenisation narratives and the ideological projects they serve. Despite a range of concerns from academic mentors about the rectitude of applying a contemporary frame to fiction from the 1950s, the risk of becoming an ideologue, or appearing to a reader as virtue-signalling, none of these risks seemed especially grave to me. Graver, I think, is the risk of assuming the discipline itself is not culturally encoded, or that the study of English literature can escape ideology. The clue, for me, is in the name itself. English literature is already encumbered with the ideology of the Western world.

Writing about English literature—especially in a far-flung post of the British empire—without considering the narrowness of its cultural recordings, or indeed how the language itself attenuates representation, is not methodologically defensible. It is not simply that certain authors are deemed canonical, but that certain styles of writing, reading, and understanding are so institutionally embedded and rewarded that they are routinely mistake for universal arbiters of quality. The perceived neutrality unnerved me most—as though white culture, academia, or the English language itself are somehow "*acultural*."

If it appears that there is a change in direction from Chapter 3 onwards, it is because there was. In the process of arguing for the eminent and influential place of Patrick White within literatures of the Australian environment, I inadvertently convinced myself that I was wrong. White has undoubtedly been influential, but I no longer see his legacy as neutral or simply "of its time." I see it as representative of an approach to Australian land that continues today, and under the aegis of a neutral, shared, human experience of nature, attempts to absolve a multitude of sins bestowed upon us by our forebears—invasion, massacre, slavery, and so on. Unifying visions of humanity and reconciliation trouble me because they elide difference, and I wonder if the powerless seek such universalising measures. Whom does this elision serve? Often, I suspect, simply the status quo.

In recent times, Australian literature has made earnest progress towards "decolonisation."[1] The peak body in the field, the Association for the Study of Australian Literature, has a new subcommittee for this decolonising practice, and there are renewed efforts to ensure Indigenous representation on the board and within its mission. Recognising that colonisation is "a structure and not an event" (408), as Patrick Wolfe observes in "Settler

[1] In "Explainer: What is Decolonisation?" (2020), Wiradjuri academic Robyn Heckenberg and her colleague Mary O'Dowd offer this definition of decolonisation: "True decolonisation seeks to challenge and change White superiority, nationalistic history and 'truth'" (Heckenberg and O'Dowd).

Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," the attempt to decolonise national literature may indeed be an oxymoron, but that is not to say that the work of eminent settler colonial writers is unworthy of examination, or that the attempt should not be made.

Patrick White, and what I have termed inheritors like David Malouf, are tremendously skilled writers whose intellectual feats warrant examination. But in the decade following 2020, I would like to see more than the replication of their eminent status in scholarship. English literature is not simply the study of different forms of storytelling and the evolution of language and its conventions, all of which illuminate the human condition over time. For most of its long history, English literature has been about the condition of being a white man, and the ongoing nature of this preoccupation is well-documented.[2]

These changes to my thinking required a complete change of supervision in the final year of my PhD and significant re-writing. I am left with a manuscript that did not, in the end, flinch from aspects of White's landscape legacy that discomforted me. My thesis thus shifted from tracing the significance of White's landscapes and their influence to asking: how can we document and commemorate the unique environmental vision of Patrick White without ignoring its limits? In other words, how can I address this gap in the field without side-lining the prejudices of White's landscapes? My thesis is an attempt to answer this question, and I think it is an important one.

[2] For further reading see: Kon-Yu, Natalie. "A Testicular Hit-List of Literary Big Cats." 2016. *Overland*, no. 223, 2016, pp. 14–20; Kon-yu, Natalie and Walker, Yvette. "The Stella Count Survey." *Stella*, stella.org.au/initiatives/research/stella-count-survey/.

Introduction: Depicting Australia – A Brief History

With the millennium ending and historical awareness re-energised, David Malouf reflected on Australians' most enduring response to their land in the form of landscape depiction. His most succinct account of this comes in an essay entitled "Second Nature" (2015), penned as the Preface to the catalogue of the Biennale of Sydney 2000. As the title underscored, a depiction of nature, irrespective of its apparent verisimilitude or objectivity, is always mediated. Of necessity it has passed through an individual mind. What is brought to paper will inevitably reflect the beholder's vantage point and personal formation. As the distinguished Japanese theorist Kojin Karatani put it, "realism was made possible not by the observation of objects, but by a delicate link between language, interiority, and object" (i). Speculation on this interaction is of course a perennial subject of Western philosophy. In Australia, as Malouf highlighted, landscape contains venerable artistic heritages of special concern to the nation in two ways:

> One the Western tradition of landscape thinking, and shaping and rendering, that goes back at least to the Renaissance, the other an [I]ndigenous tradition that reaches back millennia but has only recently, under European influence, found a way of achieving a more permanent form. ("Second Nature" 85)

As Malouf stated categorically, landscape depiction involves an ongoing process of "landscape thinking," so that what is eventually portrayed, whether in paint or prose, is in fact a "second nature."

Malouf's primary example, however, was not drawn from the classics of a broad Western tradition, the Italian *Quattrocento* or any Indigenous peoples, but from the achievement of Patrick White. Recalling the proclamations of the Nobel panel, articulated in Stockholm nearly fifty years ago, "Second Nature" begins:

> When Patrick White was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1973 he was honoured by the Swedish Academy for having, like a navigator or explorer, added a fifth and previous unknown continent to the map of literature, for having opened up to view the contours, the colours, the natural and social history of a New World that had till then been hidden and which had at last come into being so actual and immediate that readers in the world at large could now enter and move in it as if they had known it all their lives. (82)

Many of course are the explorer figures in Australian literature and the possibility that they may double as portraits of the artist is one thread that this work picks up and follows. More central to this thesis, however, is the now widely held belief that White's work marked a singular attainment and, by inference, was the climax of a century's striving by settlers to capture convincingly and project this "previous[ly] unknown continent" into literature. Hence the first part of this thesis focuses on White's colonial predecessors, before exploring how his compositions moved incrementally towards the vision praised in Stockholm. The second part considers how White's example has inspired diverse successors, taking Malouf as the pre-eminent example. The final chapter, however, acknowledges the existence of traditions and representations of Australian land that significantly predate White. Celebrating a settler writer for introducing a new continent into literature, when it has in fact been inhabited and represented for millennia, is an oversight. As a small recognition of this error, this thesis concludes with a discussion of an Indigenous vision of the land, following the overlay of supposedly "more permanent" Western forms, in the work of Alexis Wright ("Second Nature" 85).

Despite the so-called spatial turn in literary criticism, landscape—in its specific meaning as the representation of nature—has been notably absent as a central point for

discussion of major Australian novels.[3] But as Tony Hughes d'Aeth argues, "landscape is still a term that, if its ideological freight can be acknowledged, can help emphasise the fact that once the natural world enters the imaginative domain of creative literature it is always to some degree a landscape – that is, a work of art" (292). Many critical works have focused on specific types of Australian landscapes, such as the suburb and the desert, but the representation of nature itself as a literary object is seldom considered.[4]

Compared to studies in an American and British context, ecocriticism in Australian literature has evolved slowly, although there were clear advancements in the early 2000s. For example, the publication of both *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* (2006) by Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin and *The Littoral Zone: Australian Contexts and their Writers* (2007) edited by CA Cranston and Robert Zeller offered introductions to the field of ecocriticism in the Antipodes. While these texts are important contributions to the study of Australian landscape, they overwhelmingly favour a historical or theoretical methodology, have taken form as edited collections, and scarcely mention Patrick White. Moreover, the landscapes of literature are distinct from those of art history and the environment, and a literary methodology focused on close reading reveals the influence of these disciplines while allowing for the particularities of literature to emerge.

Over the past thirty years, the study of Patrick White has moved through several key phases. Following a series of critical engagements with the author during the 1990s, notably Simon During's *Patrick White* (1996), the field diversified significantly. Throughout this period, at least three main streams of scholarship on White appeared: spatial, Indigenous-authored, and ecocritical or material. The spatial turn in the critical literature on White

[3] There are some exceptions, including the edited collection by Beate Neumeier and Kay Shaffer, *Decolonising the Landscape: Indigenous Cultures in Australia* (2014), Larissa Behrendt's *Finding Eliza: Power and Colonial Storytelling* (2016), and *Halfway House: The Poetics of Australian Spaces* (2010), edited by Barbara Holloway and Jennifer Rutherford. These important scholarly works are nonetheless not chiefly literary analysis.
[4] See Nathanael O'Reilly, Brigid Rooney, and Andrew McCann on the suburb and Roslynn Haynes on the desert in Chapter 2.

corresponded with more general shifts in literary studies. For example, Andrew McCann's edited special issue of *Australian Literary Studies*, *Writing the Everyday: Australian Literature and the Limits of Suburbia* (1998) laid the groundwork for later responses to the suburb in Patrick White and Australian literature more generally. In 2012, the publication of Nathaniel O'Reilly's *Exploring Suburbia: The Suburbs in the Contemporary Australian Novel* marked a shift in the perception of White's suburban terrains. Long cast as purely negative and derisive spaces, the suburb in O'Reilly's critical reconceptualisation of it opened space for a reappraisal of the ambivalence and possibility of White's suburban landscapes. In 2018, a further major contribution to scholarship on Patrick White emerged in Brigid Rooney's *Suburban Space, the Novel and Australian Modernity*. In Rooney's study, the orthodox appraisal of White as anti-suburban is interrogated and his prototypal suburbs recast as a complex admixture of terrains that envelop the dyads of culture and nature, colonisation and diversity, hope and despair. Like O'Reilly, Rooney's approach to White is rigorous and nuanced. Introducing the suburban sections of *The Tree of Man* (1955), Rooney foregrounds their complexity. Rather than suggesting that White's novel is merely anti-suburban, settler-colonial, or post-colonial, Rooney articulates its paradoxes, suggesting that in *The Tree of Man* the "inexorable suburban development is an invasive, colonizing process" and that "White's polemic at once remembers and forgets colonization" (62).

Between 1990 and 2020, White's landscapes were reappraised in new and significant ways, with Indigenous-authored critiques of White becoming more pronounced. The publication of Jeanine Leane's PhD thesis *The Whiteman's Aborigine* (2010) was significant for its focus on Australian literature, a field of study dominated by settler scholars. Since the publication of her PhD, Leane has gone on to win multiple ARC Discovery awards and publish both academic and creative work, and has, alongside many other Indigenous scholars, asked Australian literature to receive and represent long-neglected Indigenous voices and

perspectives. By the time of Aileen Moreton-Robinson's 2015 publication of *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty* and Larissa Behrendt's *Finding Eliza: Power and Colonial Storytelling* (2016), it was impossible to overlook the settler-colonial structures of dispossession that buttressed not only the nation but its literature. This scholarship cemented understandings of cultural erasure, appropriation, and other historically overlooked Australian settler tropes as central to Patrick White's fictional legacy.

Planetary, ecocritical, and material analyses of White's fiction mark a new direction for White scholarship and potentially emerged from prior studies on White's use of abjection and environmentalism. Brigid Rooney's work on *Literary Activists: Writer-Intellectuals and Australian Public Life* (2009) arguably augured the reapproach to White as a flawed but not villainous figure in her monograph. This work was the first sustained consideration of White's environmentalism and its potential relationship to his fiction. Bridget Grogan's *Reading Corporeality in Patrick White's Fiction: An Abject Dictatorship of the Flesh* (2018) also presaged the material turn in White studies, with its compelling focus on the body and abjection throughout White's fiction as pathways to spiritual ascension. While abjection was covered in relation to White earlier in Andrew McCann's critical work,[5] Grogan's focus on the empirical body in White's fiction and its relationship to transcendental Romanticism leads in more closely to this planetary turn. Signs of an ecocritical and material focus within White studies are still nascent, and the publication of Graham Huggan's "Greening White" in 2022, as well as the award of the AD Hope prize to Samuel Cox for a materialist reading of *Voss*, suggest its momentum.[6] The new materialist turn in Patrick White studies marks a current

[5] Andrew McCann was writing about abjection in White as early as 1997 in "The Ethics of Abjection: Patrick White's *Riders in the Chariot*."

[6] The citation for Cox's award commends a "fascinating and provocative reading of Patrick White's extraordinary vision of Australia's dry inland in *Voss* by deploying the terms and emerging possibilities of the recent new materialist turn" ("A.D. Hope Prize Citation 2022").

shift in the scholarship, which arguably began with Simon During's reappraisal of the cultural value of his work in 1996.

Despite indications of an environmental turn in White studies, a significant gap in scholarship concerning the influence of Patrick White, particularly in terms of settler literature and its landscapes, remains. He is the only Australian novelist to have been awarded the Nobel Prize[7] and his fiction is still required reading in undergraduate courses across the country. Despite the questioning of his canonical status that reappraisals like During's initiated, White remains a major figure of Australian history and letters, and his legacy is consequently worth examining, particularly regarding his environmental vision. White's engagement with the land resounds throughout Australian fiction, especially from World War II onwards. Indeed, any number of Australian novelists are viable contenders for a study of his legacy: Murray Bail, Gerald Murnane, and Alex Miller are key examples. The authors I have chosen, however, fulfil two requirements. Firstly, David Malouf has acknowledged White's influence, addressing his legacy at length in published essays, and there is evidence of an enduring relationship between them—some feat considering White's notoriously intemperate demeanour. Secondly, and in contrast to the easy line drawn from Patrick White to David Malouf, Alexis Wright offers a vital counterpoint to this narrow and overwhelmingly Western, masculine, and white tradition of writing Australian land.

A Brief History

Western literature has long explored the connection between human beings and the landscape. Evolving with Christian influences from the Latin Middle Ages through to contemporary society, writers have variously sought to plumb and to explain their relationship to surrounding nature. Enduring tropes and archetypes in the visual arts and literature, such as

[7] J.M Coetzee won the Nobel Prize before he emigrated to Australia.

the *locus amoenus* or ideal landscape, attest to this endeavour. Moreover, landscapes have been approached in diverse ways. In Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1615), for example, two travellers are set against an apparently unproblematic example of a "realistic landscape"—the representation of the land is fundamentally mimetic. The prologue to *Don Quixote* begins "I have not been able to contravene the law of nature which would have it that like begets like," in an implicit acknowledgement of the work's mimetic mode (11). In contrast, the dark forest in Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1590) functions as an allegory for a fallen world beset by temptation, evident in the bewitching garden or "one big bower of bliss" in Book II (Knight 12-13), which represents the hedonistic aspects of terrestrial existence. Although the landscape operates differently in the realistic and allegorical modes, in both cases the changes undergone and the actions undertaken by the protagonist occur in relation to a landscape born out of a European imaginary informed by the real landscapes of Europe.

But what happened when the same language was entrusted with depicting the landscapes of the "New World"? After all, such landscapes often presented different natural and domestic environments to those that had shaped Western literature, and in the case of the Antipodes, even offered natural objects that directly contravened established European norms and patterns. Indeed, the anatomical and botanical chasms between the fauna and flora of *Terra Australis* and that found in the Northern Hemisphere at times suggested a defiance of Providence itself. *Terra Australis* as world turned "upside down" became an entrenched motif in the colonies, where the Australian environment was at times envisaged as either an inversion of the natural order or a perversion of God's Plan (Judith Wright, "The Upside-Down Hut" 30). The platypus, for example, so deeply bewildered the British museum that its curator George Shaw found it "naturally excites the idea of some deceptive preparation by artificial means" (228). Despite the challenges posed by such environmental idiosyncrasies,

colonisers sought to taxonomise, sketch, and record their purported discoveries, and enumerations of Australian oddities became a standard feature of colonial letters. The disjunction between European artistic expectations and the Australian landscape became apparent as soon as settlers took up pen or brush to represent their new surroundings.

Moreover, the failure of a fundamentally European artistic tradition to depict the Australian context continues to dominate its literary tradition to this day. The negotiation between language and place is an ongoing process in *Terra Australis*, and as David Malouf reminds readers, its heritage and problems abide:

> everything about the English language derives from a particular place, a particular landscape. Everything in the language has its origin in a fact of place. That's not true here. We've brought this language here, and we've made it apply to a world which is very different. (Daniel, "Interview with David Malouf")

The English language is not native to the Australian environment and for many writers has required adaptation to represent Australian land adequately. Before examining the way Patrick White and a successive generation of Australian writers took up this endeavour and sought to re-apply the English language to a "world which [was] very different," first I want to offer a brief account of the history of landscape depiction, to provide the context within which these writers arguably saw their efforts.

A key aspect of Australia's literary and artistic heritage emerged in the seventeenth century when both the word "landscape" and distinctive ways of depicting it were established and popularised by Dutch painting. Despite not being claimed by Britain until 1788, Australia was a settler colony, and as such inherited specific modes of perception and aesthetic templates. The English word derives from Middle Dutch (*landscap*) and cognate terms from German (*Landschaft*) and Old Norse (*landskap*) ("landscape" *OED*). Prior to this, especially in the visual arts, landscape had functioned primarily as a background rather than as the main

subject of a finished work. In the early works of Renaissance masters, for instance, landscape is often a precise but subordinate set of details placed to the left or right of the main subject, as in Hans Memling's portraits or Johannes Vermeer's domestic interiors (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. "Portrait of a Young Man" by Hans Memling, 1472-55

Figure 1. Memling, Hans. *Portrait of a Young Man*. Met Museum, 1472-55, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/459054.

The word "landscape" has become so ubiquitous that it is easy to overlook its remarkably recent addition to the English language. The introduction of the word was

accompanied by feverish claims of its central, human significance. In *Modern Painters* (1843), Ruskin proposed that landscape painting coincided with "the greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world", which is "to *see* something, and tell what it *saw* in a plain way" (262). For Ruskin, "to see clearly is poetry, prophecy, and religion—all in one" (262). Some one hundred years later, Kenneth Clark proposed that landscape painting heralded an entirely "new sense" of human perception (*Landscape into Art* xviii). While these virtuosic claims of the genre and its central significance to humankind are perhaps overzealous, the notion of a landscape certainly introduced new ways of conceptualising and relating to the natural environment.

The land, heretofore cast aside as background or setting, became a potential subject of art itself and with its introduction into the Western canon significantly shaped conceptions of the natural world. Kenneth Clark opens *Landscape Painting* (1950) with such a declaration:

> We are surrounded with things which we have not made and which have a life and structure different from our own: trees, flowers, grasses, rivers, ills, clouds. For centuries they have inspired us with curiosity and awe. They have been objects of delight. We have recreated them in our imagination to reflect our moods. And we have come to think of them as contributing to an idea which we have called nature. Landscape painting marks the stages in our conception of nature. (1)

The landscapes of literature, which Clark acknowledges in an aside about the natural settings of Homer's *Odyssey*, chart the "rise and development" of landscape painting (*Landscape Painting* 1). And landscape painting, at least according to Clark, has "since the middle ages" been "part of a cycle in which the human spirit attempted once more to create a harmony with its environment" (*Landscape Painting* 1). In other words, landscapes in literature, like landscape paintings, reflect the evolution of human attitudes to nature and the attempt to commune with it—a formidable task for the British among antipodean oddities. As we shall

see, later twentieth century scholars further complicated this process by demonstrating that the popularisation of both landscape painting and the word "landscape" itself point to the involvement of hegemonic structures (like empire and capitalism) distinct from the aesthetic cycle Clark observed.[8]

The Dutch "Golden Age" of landscape painting, it is generally agreed, nonetheless coincided with a "new" awareness of the land, emphasising the natural environment as a "view" that can be "taken in at a glance" ("landscape" *OED*). From the commanding glance or vantage point, it was but a small step to commodifying the landscape or making it utilisable. Such attempts, however, inherently ran the risk of overlooking the diversity, complexity, and dynamism of a natural environment. Dutch landscape painting, then, was linked with possession and by extension imperialism. In Dutch land- or seascapes by Jacob van Ruisdael or Jan van Goyen, canvases were often dominated by rivers, hills, trees, winding tracks, and fields, with churches or windmills in the distance. In addition, these masters often celebrated the landscape as "property" or specifically subject to ownership, complete with the corresponding affluence that such a status connotes. This is apparent in Goyen's "Castle by a River" (1647) or Ruisdael's "The Great Pool" (1652).[9] In the former painting, a castle stands

[8] Twentieth century scholarship on landscape, especially with relevance to English literature, includes John Barrell's *The Dark Side of Landscape* (1980) and Ann Bermingham's *Landscape and Ideology* (1987) through to WJT Mitchell's more recent *Landscape and Power* (1994). Barrell's work focuses on the enclosure period in England and the disjuncture between the depiction of "stable, unified, almost egalitarian society" (5) in landscape paintings and the social reality of the time. In this regard, and as Mitchell summarised in his own compendium of landscape writing, one of Barrell's significant contributions to thinking about landscape was the idea that landscape painting could "naturalize a cultural and social construction, representing an artificial world as if it were simply given and inevitable" (*Landscape and Power* 2). Bermingham's work develops this premise and provides an "art-historical account of the meaning and significance of landscape" that necessitates "addressing all the ways it has been seen, recorded, represented, explained, understood, appreciated, and valued" (27). In this regard, the different responses of individual artists but also cultural groups and historical periods to the land "reveal both the ideological and the artistic range of aesthetic imagination. By inscribing the social values of industrialisation, their landscapes become sites for the expression of society's positive as well as often ambivalent feelings about the changing social order" (27). By extension, Bermingham suggests that problems with landscape—troubled dealings with nature", to which this century is certainly no stranger—often mirror "feelings about ourselves" (27).

[9] These paintings are held respectively by the Met Museum: https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/436559 and Newfields, Indianapolis: http://collection.imamuseum.org/artwork/56808/.

over the river, and notably above the fishermen working on its banks, suggesting a degree of wealth and stature, while in "The Great Pool" wealth is instead implied by an idyllic neighbourhood whose beauty, trees, and river suggest pronounced material affluence (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. "The Great Pool" by Jacob van Ruisdael, 1652

Figure 2. Ruisdael, Jacob van. "The Great Pool." Newfields, Indianapolis, 1652, collection.imamuseum.org/artwork/56808/.

In what follows, the word "landscape" will be used in accordance with its standard definition as "all the visible features of an area of land, often considered in terms of their aesthetic appeal" and "a tract of land with its distinguishing characteristics and features, esp. considered as a product of modifying or shaping processes and agents (usually natural)"

("landscape" *OED*).[10] Closely related is the concept of topography as a description or depiction of the physical features of a specific place, such as hills, valleys, and waterways. Topography is a mapping out of the physical features of a place and landscape a grouping of natural elements in a single view. Both are thus everyday terms of which people have a common-sense understanding. Significantly, the definitions of the words "landscape" and "topography" foreground the visual aspect of a land perceived as a single whole. In other words, from its first usage the term landscape has been conceived as always-already representational. Landscape is not simply the land but a land-scene, image, or curated view of an area.[11]

Over the two centuries from colonisation in 1788 through to the post-war era, settler representations of the southern continent changed immensely. While landscapes already had commercial and legal ramifications, a colonised space typically posed additional problems of representation for a would-be settler, and Australia was no exception. The colonial struggle to understand and depict the land went hand in hand with and indeed was an important part of the effort to colonise it. Writers eventually uncovered some new ways to describe, relate to, and situate characters within a landscape but not before grappling with the uncomfortable task of trying to impose European aesthetics and modes of perception onto *Terra Australis*. Apart from the many natural curiosities and impossibilities or improbabilities Australian nature offered, it also challenged the aesthetic and linguistic norms the colonisers brought with them.

[10] The second listed meaning of landscape, as "a view or prospect of natural inland scenery, such as can be taken in at a glance from one point of view; a piece of country scenery," became more commonly used in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries ("landscape" *OED*). This slight change in usage – from a word that denotes, essentially, a painting, to a word that more generally denotes nature – compounds its complexity, creating a term that at times equates the natural world with a representation or framing of it: "a view … of natural inland scenery" ("landscape" *OED*).

[11] To distinguish between landscape as a representation and the land itself, terms like environment, nature, and indeed land or countryside are used when referring to an empirical natural world. This distinction is uneasy, however, because (as I outline in the conclusion), the land was already cultivated and represented by its Traditional Owners when British settlers first arrived. In this regard, the boundary between what we might consider a "natural" environment and a landscape reveals a suite of Western biases.

Standard English and Continental education contributed to an experience of environmental and aesthetic dissonance. In the journey to *Terra Australis*, many educated free settlers brought not only a rudimentary acquaintance with the classics but also basic skills in fine arts such as music, sketching, or watercolours. These, in turn, relied on their own models and their rules. Colonial depictions of unspoilt nature might have been coloured by Ovid's *Metamorphoses* or Virgil's pastoral poetry, or the paintings of Claude Lorrain and Salvator Rosa, and the picturesque was widespread and popular. Signifying at its simplest what would constitute a picture or canvas, the picturesque called for a range of properties and structuring devices, such as coulisses, objects of interest, and a vanishing point. Quite literally, the picturesque was theorised as "that peculiar kind of beauty, which is agreeable in a picture" (Gilpin ix).[12]

So pervasive were these conventions of beauty that they even reappear in scientific accounts at the time. A journal entry by Sir Joseph Banks, the pre-eminent natural scientist accompanying Captain James Cook on HMS *Endeavour*, betrays an eye trained in the arts as well as the sciences:[13]

> We saw … an extraordinary natural curiosity. In pursuing a valley bounded on each side by steep hills, we suddenly saw a most noble arch or cavern through the face of a

[12] The English word "picturesque" originated in the eighteenth century, soon after the introduction of the word "landscape." It derived from the French word *pittoresque*, meaning "relating to painting" in 1708 ("picturesque" *OED*), which in turn stems from the Latin word for painter, or *pictorem*. The t's from the French *pittoresque* were dropped and substituted with -ct in English to resemble the word "picture" ("picturesque" OED) more closely.

[13] Banks employed two artists—Alexander Buchan and Sidney Parker—to record landscapes on this voyage. Sketches were only produced between 1768 and 1770 as both artists died at sea, before any landscapes of *Terra Australis* could be produced. While landscapes were later sketched by artists accompanying Cook's successive voyages, the untimely deaths of Parker and Buchan serve as a morbid though poetic reminder of the problems early settlers faced in the transferral of European modes of landscape perception and depiction to *Terra Australis*. The Antipodes, however, had been subject to cartographic depiction as far back as the fifteenth century, despite the lack of empirical evidence for its existence. A large southern land mass was presumed necessary to balance the northern and southern spheres of the earth, in accordance with geological theories that dated back to the fifth century and Macrobius' maps. Thereafter, *Terra Australis* became a canvas for Arcadian projections and the creative whims of European imaginations. The Pacific, as John Noble Wilford describes in *The Mapmakers* (1981), was a "new arena for trade" but the "philosophical implications" of these discoveries were perhaps the most profound (152).

> rock leading directly to the sea, so that through it we had not only a view of the bay and hills on the other side, but an opportunity of imagining a ship or any other grand object opposite to it. (qtd. in Smith, *European Vision and the South Pacific, 1768–1850: a Study in the History of Art and Ideas* 28)

Despite proclaiming "so much is pure nature superior to art in these cases," Banks' account is informed by the conventions of landscape painting at the time (17). As the art historian Bernard Smith points out: "Banks's description is carefully composed like a painting: in the foreground the arch, the sea behind, the hills on either side, and to give a centre to the view, an imaginary ship" (29). Prose fiction and verse were often similarly indebted.

The cardinal place of Bernard Smith in Australian landscape scholarship highlights a tendency to centre fine art, architecture, and cultural studies in critical appraisals of the land. Smith's conception of Australian nature and its representation has remained foundational since the first edition of *European Vision and the South Pacific, 1768–1850: a Study in the History of Art and Ideas* in 1960. Though largely focused on landscape painting, Smith's scholarship nevertheless captured the role of European vision in observing and representing the Australian environment. Much of the literature after Smith shares a disciplinary focus on art, history, and cultural analysis. George Seddon, for example, is a prominent successor, and although trained as an English scholar his work is profoundly interdisciplinary. An impression of this generalised approach is evident in the opening pages of Seddon's essay "A Sense of Place" (1972), where he broadly introduces a Western tradition of countenancing nature:

> The most enchanting dream that has ever consoled mankind is the myth of a Golden Age, in which man lived on the fruits of the earth peacefully, piously, and with primitive simplicity. But the complex problems of today's world are hardly to be solved by our all going camping, or sitting around taking in each other's wishing. The view that an unspoiled environment is one untouched by man can hardly be pushed to

> its logical conclusion, and in any case it is misleading, first because it sets Man against Nature, where it is more illuminating to see man as a part of nature; and secondly, because man is not always a despoiler. He can also be creative. (23)

In a few simple sentences, Seddon crystallises the diurnal paradoxes of landscape: ideations of "unspoiled" wilderness and the yearning for an Edenic "Golden Age" exist alongside "man" as part of nature and equally capable of destruction and creativity. Seddon's gift is in such cultural analysis. In the introduction to *George Seddon: Selected Writings* (2019), the environmental historian Tom Griffiths describes Seddon as "the Professor of Everything" noting his "appointments as a professor of Geology, a professor of History and Philosophy of Science and a professor of Environmental Science" alongside a teaching career that included posts in "departments of English and Philosophy" (9). Yet despite Seddon's literary training, and for all the interdisciplinary exchanges of "environmental history, a mode of inquiry demanding a new kind of literary and scientific integration," fiction is rarely a major focus of his essays (13).

Nevertheless, these broad approaches invariably agree that imposed upon *Terra Australis* were not only imported agricultural methods but an aesthetic template for how to perceive and evaluate the land. The writing of educated settlers, such as Louisa Clifton, assumed readers with similar tastes. In a journal entry from 1841, Clifton promised an imagined reader "some description of the picturesque romantic scenes in which we are now engaged" (8).[14] Clifton even suggests that the Australian landscape is worthy of one of the great picturesque painters, Claude Lorrain:

[14] Interestingly, the populated campsite to which Clifton refers seems to lend itself more easily to the picturesque imagining than the bare countryside—an experience also described by Barron Field in his *Journal of an Excursion across the Blue Mountains of New South Wales*:

> The air was refreshing. All were asleep from fatigue, with large fires of piled wood at their feet, the gleams of which (for they had been suffered to go down) gave a picturesque effect to the tent and cart, and to the tethered horses, which were patiently standing on the bleak and bare hill. (424)

> The scene has been most beautiful, worthy and pencil of a Claude Lorraine [*sic*]; the moon and sky dazzlingly bright; the sea glistening and perfectly smooth; the outline of the shore dark and clear; the lurid flash and the curling grey and vermilion smoke of the fires throwing a bright redness over the scene, investing with a wildness congenial to the spot and exciting to the imagination. (7)

The picturesque tradition provided early settlers with a standard against which aesthetic beauty could be measured and a lens through which landscapes could be perceived and adjusted. Clifton, for example, is struck by the beauty of the coast and frames her description according to the conventions of the picturesque. From her description, one might imagine a dark seascape, offset by a bright vermilion fire as a coulisse, perhaps attended, for example, by a small group of settlers all skilfully placed. But without such adjustments, many settlers shared the sentiments of explorers like Barron Field, for whom *Terra Australis* was "no beautiful or picturesque country" (*Journal of an Excursion across the Blue Mountains of New South Wales* 424). Emphatically Field asserted "there is not a single scene in it of which a painter could make a landscape, without greatly disguising the true character of the trees" (424).[15] It is no wonder, then, that despite the sense of promise Clifton's scene affords, she fails to translate her impression of the landscape into a picture: "I then went on deck, alone to try and sketch the coast, but failed" (7).

In Australian colonial prose and verse, on the other hand, an imperial aesthetic was initially reflected in attitudes towards the native flora, fauna, and Indigenous people, widely depicted by settlers or explorers as having been, in effect, missed or left out of Providence's

[15] Field extends this indictment of the native countryside to include its lack of metaphoric and literary potential: "All the dearest allegories of human life are bound up in the infant and slender green of spring, the dark redundance of summer, and the sere and yellow leaf of autumn. These are as essential to the poet as emblems, as they are to the painter as picturesque objects; and the common consent and immemorial custom of European poetry have made the change of seasons, and its effect upon vegetation, a part, as it were, of our very nature. I can therefore hold no fellowship with Australian foliage, but will cleave to the British oak through all the bareness of winter" (*Journal of an Excursion across the Blue Mountains of New South Wales* 424).

master plan. A prevailing theme in Barron Field's *The Kangaroo* (1825), the poet attributes a lack of providential direction to the unsettling make-up of the native animal: "Nature, in her wisdom's play/On Creation's holiday" (11). Far from inspiring new arrivals, the *genii loci* or their surrogates in local fauna were sometimes depicted as guileless and fortunate to receive their newcomers' guidance, as in Charles Harpur's verse:

> And as they supped, birds of new shape and plume
> And wild strange voice came by; and up the steep
> Between the climbing forests growth they saw
> Perched on the bare abutments of the hills
> Where haply yet some lingering gleam fell through,
> The wallaroo look forth: til eastward all … (Harpur 27)

These native "birds" of "wild strange voice" are positioned as eager to receive the settlers' sage reflections. They "listen in" to the explorer-settlers' apparent wisdom and novel sounds, which reach them like some lingering gleam of belated but vital enlightenment.

In this gradual appropriation and assimilation of an unknown realm, writing held a special place and afforded at times a virtual "charter to empire" (Ackland, *That Shining Band* 28). Transcription not only described a new land but attested to its civilisation and "'legitimise[d]' the attitudes and actions of a forming nation" (28). The centrality of literature to nationalisation followed the biblical notion that naming precedes being and prescribes power. First, the divine word is presented as all-powerful: "Then God said, 'Let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds'" (*Genesis* 1). Then God grants "man" power over the land and "naming [itself] bestows dominion over creation," foreshadowing the later role of settler language and literature as a means of possessing a new land (Ackland, *That Shining Band* 31).

The role of the English language in laying claim to the land has been discussed from numerous perspectives. In 1979, Edward Said had already declared that "it hardly needs to be demonstrated again that language is a highly organized and encoded system" (21). There is no "truth" in language, he reiterated, only "representation" (21). For the local context, the most popular study arguably remains Paul Carter's spatial history of Australia's colonisation, which emphasised the significant role of naming in transforming colonial "space" into "place":

> space is transformed symbolically into a place, that is, a space with a history. And, by the same token, the namer inscribes his passage permanently on the world, making a metaphorical word-place which others may one day inhabit and by which, in the meantime, he asserts his own place in history. (*The Road to Botany Bay: An Essay in Spatial History* xxiv)

Yet the spaces named during colonisation, and so inscribed and historicised, were already places with names and a history for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and the imported names often bore no relation to the landscapes they described.[16] The linguistic and spatial instruments of colonisation bore traces of a biblical heritage that naturalised humankind's rise to power and reign over "lesser" aspects of the empirical world.

Australia is not unique in this regard. Other colonies, including Canada and New Zealand, contend with both a similar rupture between environment and language and a shared colonial legacy inscribed in place names. In *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (1977), the acclaimed human geographer Yi-Fu Tuan outlined the function of language in creating place: "Curiosity about places is part of a general curiosity about things, part of the need to label experiences so that they have a greater degree of permanence and fit into some

[16] For example, the island now referred to as Rottnest Island was originally Rottenest Eijland, so named by the Dutch explorer Willem de Vlamingh (1696) because it appeared to be infested with rats. These "rats" are, of course, now recognised as the native marsupial quokka. The history of Australian place names is replete with such malapropisms and anglicisations.

conceptual scheme" (29). In the course of empire, such a schema is purposefully imposed on pre-existing cultures:

> The effort to evoke a sense of place and of the past is often deliberate and conscious. To the extent that the effort is conscious it is the mind at work, and the mind—if allowed its imperial sway—will annul the past by making it all present knowledge. (212)

The designation and creation of place in the image of the colonising power is intrinsic to imperialism. In Australia, Tuan describes this practice as overlaying a "landscape littered with memorials to mythic heroes," forestalling the cultural "re-enactment" of these journeys as acts of memorialisation, and the inscription in "topographical features" of time as well as place (132). Colonisation occurred not merely in the land or in naming but in conceptions of time and history.

The dismissal of Indigenous cultures and attempts to transpose not only a foreign language on *Terra Australis* but entirely different modes of knowing produced a wide body of landscape writing, including maps, journals, letters, poetry, botanical references and, of course, novels. Yet the so-called discovery journeys of Australia's explorers and settlers concerned a place that was already known to its First Nations, making the act of exploration and affiliated transcriptions inherently metanarratological.[17] Not only do placenames, for example, stand as testaments to colonial exploration, but they are imposed upon pre-existing colonial and Indigenous narratives of place and placenames. Furthermore, the imported names often bear no relation to the landscapes they describe. As Malouf suggests in the opening sentence of *Harland's Half Acre* (1984):

[17] The term metanarratological refers to the way that exploration was aware of, and constructed, a storytelling process.

> Named like so much else in Australia for a place on the far side of the globe that its finders meant to honour and were piously homesick for, Killarney bears no resemblance to its Irish original. (3)

Malouf's narrator emphasises the discordance between the original Killarney and its Australian namesake. The original village is like many in Ireland—cold, green, and renowned for its lakes and castles. The Australian town stands in stark contrast: a warm subtropical hinterland of natural splendour, famous for its waterfalls. White settlement in Australia saw imported place names transposed upon different environments, as is obvious in place names like New South Wales.

More sweepingly, the declaration *terra nullius* was transposed over existing people and languages (Carter xxiv). The term *terra nullius* was, after all, a legal force: "nobody's land" was a retrospective and self-serving British mandate "deeming there were no property rights in the continent when the British took it" (Tynan 173). In this respect, the colonial founding narrative of Australia was itself a landscape fiction. Paul Carter's interest in metalanguage, of course, has become relevant to more contemporary writers who, having already negotiated a core relationship with the land, increasingly acknowledge as fictional themes the historical connection between language, landscape, and literature in *Terra Australis*. The history of white Australia's reception and expression of landscape has certainly shaped, if not uniquely catalysed, this self-reflexive turn.

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the notion that imperial progress and the rise and fall of successive empires were natural and inevitable found expression in settler writing. Robert Dixon has documented the sway of Enlightenment thinking and tropes in literature and the visual arts traditions in Australia in *The Course of Empire, Neo-Classical Culture in New South Wales, 1788-1860* (1986). "The course of empire," he explains, provided "the painter, the poet and the explorer with a rhetoric with which they announce the

imperial destiny of a young nation" (3). Dixon convincingly argues that Australian nationalism did not emerge in the 1890s, as it is commonly held, but had simply assumed a different form for most of the nineteenth century. In this imperial form of nationalism, the value and merit of a painting or work of literature was attributed to it based on how well an artist or writer adopted or imitated "conventional [European] models of descriptive embellishments" (3). Rather than "record unique features" of *Terra Australis*, such works sought to highlight "those aspects of colonial life which confirmed the normal advance of [European] civil society" (4).

This initial imperial drive and associated attempts to apply European aesthetic templates to Australia shifted in focus towards the end of the nineteenth century. The movement towards federation coincided with a determined endeavour to perceive and celebrate local landscapes in their own terms. In the *Introduction* to *The Bulletin Story Book*, originally published in 1901, AG Stephens proclaimed:

> let us look at our country and its fauna and flora, its trees and streams and mountains, through clear Australian eyes, not through bias-bleared English spectacles; and there is no more beautiful country in the world. (249)

One such attempt is Lawson's much anthologised "The Drover's Wife" (1892), which begins in effect by denying the local landscape the key elements of the picturesque:

> Bush all round – bush with no horizon, for the country is flat. No ranges in the distance. The bush consists of stunted, rotten native apple trees. No undergrowth. Nothing to relieve the eye save the darker green of a few sheoaks which are sighing above the narrow, almost waterless creek. Nineteen miles to the nearest sign of civilization – a shanty on the main road. (64)

Anything but picturesque, the bush is depicted as a lifeless, "flat," and "stunted" space. The landscape is devoid of an obvious coulisse, visually monotonous and without any indication

of Western civilisation. The nearest approximation—a sly grog store or "shanty on the main road"—is an arduous "nineteen miles away." This sense of the intractability of the local landscape lasted well into the twentieth century. Australia was difficult to exploit not only agriculturally but culturally and seemingly resisted symbolic literary depiction, at least in established terms and available codes. Echoes of earlier complaints of "weird melancholy" of hysterical laughing creatures and madness inducing circumstances continued to appear (Clarke, "Preface to Adam Lindsay Gordon's *Sea Spray and Smoke Drift*" 45). Much of Australian nature defied the comprehension of most settlers; their reason and aesthetic norms were overmatched by its peculiar and original countryside.

The increasing emphasis placed on the uniqueness of the Australian landscape, however desolate, and its creative potential shaped the cultural climate into which Patrick White began to publish. By the 1930s, a classical and imperial aesthetic had been rejected by many Australian-born artists, most notably in the local landscapes of Russell Drysdale and later Sidney Nolan. Bolstered by federation and the surge of nationalist sentiment experienced during the world wars, writers and artists increasingly sought to derive literary and cultural value from the particularities of life in Australia. This nationalist ethos, however, was not unproblematic, and still in its infancy. The 1950s thus saw very divergent responses to local cultural developments. On the one hand, AA Phillips famously lambasted an endemic sense of inferiority in 1950, "the characteristic Australian Cultural Cringe" produced by the "loom[ing] intimidating mass of Anglo-Saxon culture" (299). Yet in the same decade local cultural journals played an ever more prominent role, the Jindyworobak heritage was strong, and Australian writers, especially poets, had high aspirations.

White made his own influential contribution to this ongoing debate with the publication of his essay "The Prodigal Son" in 1958. It not only served as a searing indictment of a style of writing that had historically dominated Australian literature, but also

of a dearth of cultural and intellectual endeavour in Australian society. From 1788 through to 1958, to White's mind Australia had been preoccupied with physical survival and success, with frank materialism often going unchallenged. As a settler colony, Australia had not benefited from a long and rich national history but had borrowed extensively from the discoveries of older Western nations. "The Prodigal Son" depicts Australia as enamoured with industry and supposed "progress," valorising commerce—that "march of material ugliness"—above culture (15). Turning his critical faculties on his homeland, White proposed that "in all directions stretched the Great Australian Emptiness, in which the mind is the least of possessions" (15). Australia's emptiness was not in the landscape or in the particularities of the environment at all but was, as White outlines, cultural, even spiritual. The true "Great Australian emptiness" rested in a refusal or inability to engage meaningfully with a landscape that generations of Australians now called home (15).

In "The Prodigal Son" White described Australian literature as "the dreary dun-coloured offspring of journalistic realism" (15). In grappling with grand imported aesthetic modes, like the Dutch tradition and the picturesque, and in facing such a different landscape to Europe, Australian writers appeared to turn instinctively to literal or mimetic forms of representation. The result was a literary form of "Paterson's curse"—noxious, hardy, widespread, and proliferating (*Flaws in the Glass* 139).[18] By "dun-coloured realism," White was presumably referring to the influence of the social realist school which directly preceded him and dominated the 1940s and 1950s in Australia, to which commentary has attributed a political dimension:

[18] "Paterson's Curse" or *Echium plantagineum* is the name of a common Australian weed. For White, A.B. Paterson exemplified dun-coloured realism and a wry, mean-spirited pun would not be unprecedented for the author.

> It is a fiction which boasts its radical spirit, and claims to preserve intact what it thought of as the Lawson-Furphy tradition. But that radicalism is in fact no more than an affirmation of working class values … (Kramer 128)

A broader perspective, it was generally agreed, was lacking in Australian literature. In 1958, White would announce programmatically his goal to help "people a barely inhabited country with a race possessed of understanding" ("The Prodigal Son" 17). White's essay, which marks a significant turn in approaches to the local land, has become a primary document of Australia's literary history.

The term "dun-coloured realism" captures the realism—almost literalism—that had prevailed in Australia's "history of prose" since settlement, and which began "with writers of memoirs," verse, and bush ballads (Kramer 27).[19] Henry Lawson, Banjo Patterson, and the bush poets were "a powerful, continuing influence" throughout the twentieth century (Bennett, *Australian Short Fiction: A History* 134). Popular titles at the time included Gavin Casey's "It's Harder for Girls" (1942) and Alan Marshall's "Tell Us About the Turkey, Jo" (1946) (Kramer 129). The latter work, which was originally published as "Bush Interpretation" (1946) in the *Cairns Post* as a column printed under the familiar parochial heading "Our Weekend Story," captures well the "journalistic realism" White decried" ("The Prodigal Son" 15):

> He came walking through the rusty grasses and sea-weedish plants that fringe Lake Corangamite. Behind him strode his brother. He was very fair. His hair was a pale gold

[19] Although the phrase "dun-coloured realism" is applicable in this excerpt, the term "dun-coloured" is not connected to the spectrum of colours employed, or fundamentally with the landscape at all. The word "dun," typically used in a compound construction, ranges in meaning from "greyish-yellow" and "sandy," through to "dull greyish-brown," "dingy brown," and "dark coloured rock" ("dun" *OED*). At times, it is assumed that White's use of the term "dun" refers to the "greyish-yellow" and "dull greyish-brown" colours of the Australian outback, but this conception overlooks the fact that "dun-coloured" functions as a qualifier of the noun "realism," rather than the land. Moreover, while Kramer's assessment reflects widespread attitudes to dun-coloured realism, in *Australian Short Fiction: A History* (2002), Bruce Bennett is more forgiving of the period generally: "A common view of the 1950s and 60s as a period of affluent conservatism, mindlessness and Anglo-Australian dominance is superficial" (145). It does, for example, overlook the work of Christina Stead, Hal Porter, and Martin Boyd, who had already begun writing at the time.

> and when he scratched his head the parted hairs revealed the pink skin of his scalp. His eyes were very blue. He was freckled. ("Bush Interpretaton" 3)

There is a photographic realism to the depiction, which presents merely what is visible without further resonance, whereas in White's fiction blue eyes and cascading chest-hair become markers of intellectual vacuity and profligate spirits.

With "dun-coloured journalistic realism," White arguably referred to a stylistic preference beyond any notion of the Australian landscape ("The Prodigal Son" 15). In the above passage from Marshall, for example, various colours are associated with the Australian landscape: rusty, fair, pale gold, pink, and blue. Moreover, there are "grasses" and "plants" cordoning the lake—signs of life amid the "dead heart" of Australia's outback. The prose, however, is short and clipped: in a word, "journalistic," and the characterisation desultory ("The Prodigal Son" 15). Proverbially, the term "dun" was used throughout literature, including use in Shakespeare and Chaucer, to signify something still, motionless, intractable, and without life ("dun" *OED*). Australian writing, despite self-conscious efforts to achieve authenticity and difference, usually failed to achieve either. Yet Australian landscapes could yield fascinating enigmas and insights. It was, as AG Stephens had proclaimed, potentially magnificently enabling; and White set out to prove it.

Born out of his distaste for the local "exaltation of the average" he saw around him, White wrote *The Tree of Man* (1955) and soon after *Voss* (1957) ("The Prodigal Son" 15). "The Prodigal Son" (1958) contextualises these novels and foreshadows the publication of *Riders in the Chariot* (1961). "The Prodigal Son" suggests that White sought, through his fiction, to demonstrate that Australia was not bound by the parochial or provincial. It need not look to Europe to provide a cultural road map, or as the only wellspring of creative inspiration. Nor did Australia have to revert to a journalistic or nationalistic celebration of the outback—an existence commented upon and articulated more than it was lived. White

suggested that he "wanted to discover the extraordinary behind the ordinary, the mystery and the poetry which alone could make bearable the lives of such people, and incidentally, my own life since my return" ("The Prodigal Son" 15). In doing so, he attempted to honour and address the diversity and beauty of Australian terrains and the largely untapped potential of its inhabitants, even of its outcasts.

Patrick White is unquestionably Australia's pre-eminent literary figure, winning the Nobel Prize, Miles Franklin Award, and Australian of the Year during his career. Although his legacy is only one of the briefer histories Australia can offer in terms of this relationship between language and landscape, his influence is nevertheless discernible across a broad range of Australian fiction. The progression from White's "The Prodigal Son" (1958) through to contemporary Australian fiction suggests a culture no less preoccupied with its landscape today than it was sixty-odd years ago. Indeed, its recurrence and depiction suggest a culture engaged in a continuing and evolving negotiation with Australian land and its representation. Understandably, however, each generation has brought to bear its own historical concerns upon the landscape, from colonisation and war through to technology, environmental politics, Indigenous ontologies, and the nature of reality.

This thesis proceeds from the understanding that the means employed by White's characters to map and navigate the land, the expansive mythology of the land itself, and his approach to visionary perception have been central to his influence. It draws lines of connection between White and successive writers of the landscape. White's influence on David Malouf is evident across their approach to both Australian nature and the landscape. The emphasis on landscape within broader discursive templates, be they historical, representational, or otherwise, suggests the authors' interrogation of not simply social realism, but reality itself. Although many authors have responded variously to the Australian landscape and indeed to Patrick White, Malouf incorporates White's interrogation of language

and landscape in his effort to metaphysically connect to and represent the land. While coming from a markedly different tradition and perspective, Alexis Wright's depiction of Australian nature and the landscape, and the way in which these realities are framed and distributed, speaks to some of the fundamental questions posed by White's fiction. From her use of the rubbish dump as a literary motif through to the exploration of nature, the sacred, and the sovereignty of Indigenous people, there is rich material in Wright's fiction for a consideration of the contrast and confluence between a mostly white and male tradition, deriving key impetus from White, with an Indigenous voice.

In brief, this thesis contends that landscape in literature represents a mediated scene that reflects an author's values and suppositions, as well as potentially wider national shifts and trends. Colonial settlers were inheritors of, and seminally influenced by, dominant imperial, artistic, empirical, and taxonomic traditions, as we have seen. Accordingly, these informed efforts to record unfamiliar scenes and vegetation. By the end of the nineteenth century, realism dominated local letters, an artistic approach whose verisimilitude and seeming objectivity cloaked both its historical and ethnocentric roots in Anglo-Celtic culture. As Karatani underscores in his authoritative survey on "The Discovery of Landscape," ultimately "landscape is an epistemological constellation" (22) that becomes "a representational convention" (23). At each stage, as he convincingly demonstrates, interiority has a key role to play, but this shaping and making by the inner self is usually veiled behind mimetic conventions. This thesis reveals both the driving forces implicit in an individual's fiction and the special forms taken in it by interiority. In White's case, what in other authors was often concealed interiority becomes a key narrative device and indeed proof of an individual's election to a higher spiritual dominion. Chapter One traces the gradual ascendancy of the visionary individual in his early fiction and Chapter Two his radical reappraisal of stock landscape evaluations and sources of imaginative potential—in other

words, it deals with the formation of his mature artistic vision. In the work of his successors like Malouf, this heritage is re-evaluated. Chapter Three argues that Malouf re-envisages visionary regeneration and problematises it within the tradition of the Australian mythology of the lost explorer, while Chapter Four considers the existence of entirely distinct traditions, exemplified by the fiction of Alexis Wright. Far from an inheritor of White, Wright's prose illuminates the narrow margins within which the Australian landscape has been widely conceived.

In addition to addressing a gap in the study of White's environments, which are as profound in their biodiversity and attention to empirical detail as they are full of spiritual and metaphoric potential, I advance two primary claims. First, White was influential in cultural understandings of Australian nature in the twentieth century, a claim exemplified by the work of David Malouf. The cultural authority of White, alongside his personal investment in environmental politics, advanced certain ideas about the Australian landscape, notably its worthiness of celebration and underexplored poetic promise. But White's authority and influence nonetheless reinforced troubling settler narratives about the Australian environment. The second major claim of this thesis concerns the imminent uptake in planetary and environmental readings of White. These readings of White's fiction are overdue but risk sublimating the complexity and problems that arise in White's depiction of nature and Indigenous custodians of the land. I propose that White scholars might best acknowledge his significant contribution to Australian environmental fiction through comparative readings of similar environments in the fiction of Indigenous authors. By reading White through Alexis Wright's own emergent legacy, surprising similarities arise in their observance of the natural world, but a comparative lens equally highlights the limitations of settler vision, including Western universalism. This, I hope, goes some way towards ensuring that White's limitations

and failures in representing the land and its history are remembered alongside his impressive environmental vision.

Chapter 1: Ancient Lands and New Worlds – Patrick White's Early Landscapes

Early colonial responses to the diverse terrains of *Terra Australis* were often, as we have seen, shaped and coloured by transported and so-called "Old World" traditions. At its simplest, settler expectations encountered "New World" unfamiliarities.[20] This promoted an imaginative merging that was a basic norm for at least the first European settlers and later for Patrick White. With accumulating experience and ancestral ties to the local land, as well as actual encounters in Australia, a deeper and even automatic sense of personal attachment to the country developed in successive generations. While some felt a familial connection to forebears who had translated a British heritage to the Australian context, others felt that the blood and suffering of their ancestors, alongside considerable inherited pastoral estates, gave them kinship with the land. By the twentieth century, many settlers felt that they belonged to the land as much as it belonged to them. As John McCallum asserts in his history of Australian playwriting, settlers in the early twentieth century felt they had made the "painful transition from pioneering days to a new life based in a hard-won tradition of family and settlement" (76). But in what meaningful sense was this state of mutual belonging possible? Compared to the ancient Antipodes, the supposed "Old Worlds" of England and Europe were quite new, while the "New World" of Australia had been occupied and owned for millennia. But beyond deep historical roots, or the physical holding of vast acreages, there was always the prospect of possessing the land mentally or imaginatively—a process that assumes exemplary form in the early work of Patrick White.

According to his literary manifesto "The Prodigal Son" (1958), a key moment in Patrick White's career involved discovering that it was in and to Australia that he belonged

[20] My use of these terms reflects their contemporaneous usage at the time of White's writing. They are problematic as standalone terms. I aim to use them here to highlight the latent paradox in early settler conceptions of "Old" and "New Worlds." For further discussion of this misnomer, please refer to Chapter 4.

emotionally and imaginatively. Before his eventual return to Australia in 1948, he had been a London dilettante in the making, "brought up to believe in the maxim: Only the British can be right" and educated among stock European landscapes (13). Between his time at an English boarding school and Cambridge, White had been thoroughly immersed in an English comportment. But returning to Australia's different and vibrant colours saw seminal memories "come flooding back" and a new, imaginatively engaged novelist was born (16). The resulting creative impetus was given memorable expression in "The Prodigal Son." Here, White briefly outlined the reasons for his post-war return to Sydney and linked it with a radical change of emphasis in his writing:

> So, amongst the rewards, there is refreshed landscape which even in its shabbier, remembered version has always made a background to my life. The worlds of plants and music may never have revealed themselves had I sat talking brilliantly to Alister Kershaw over a Pernod on the Left Bank. Possibly all art flowers more readily in silence. (16)

White suggests that remaining in London would have consigned him to the creatively barren life of a "London intellectual" ("The Prodigal Son" 14). Australia, however, offered vibrancy, a new and verdant world of flora and fauna: in short, a "refreshed landscape" (16). Yet this marked difference in creative opportunity inspired by his respective homelands was perhaps not as clear-cut as White suggested. In fact, as I show, this account seems more an exercise in personal mythmaking than fact. White's initial novels reveal not so much a break between the productions of the effete and "sterile" London intellectual he feared to become and that of a returned prodigal son but a steady development of key and ongoing preoccupations that climax in *The Aunt's Story* (1948) (14). Moreover, the manuscript of *The Aunt's Story*, far from being inspired by White's return to Australia, was already in his luggage when he left London ("The Prodigal Son" 14). This chapter first examines key influences on his authorial

formation and the traditions that his early novels both draw on and supplant, before finally tracing from the outset of his career developments and continuities in his representation of landscape and character. Returning to Australia did not so much change his authorial trajectory as provide ample opportunities to deepen and expand it.

White, by his birth and upbringing, typified the split between Old and New World heritages. In his case, the experience of a split fealty was especially pronounced given his strong familial ties both to England and Australia and his immersion in these two very different environments. Before commencing Modern Languages at Cambridge, White had moved between Australia and England no less than four times, fostering a sense of otherness in the company of both his English classmates and Australian family.[21] In *Flaws in the Glass* (1981) he recalls being the "colonialist" in London and the "changeling" or "gentleman" at home (46). Born in London, raised in Australia, then serving as an Australian soldier fighting for the British in a predominantly European war, White was well-placed to discern the colossal changes—intellectual as well as material—and shifting loyalties that accompanied World War II.

What he discerned during the war was convincing proof of the failure of much vaunted "reason." Its reign can be dated from at least the Enlightenment and key French thinkers, or *philosophes*, who used demanding empirical and rational standards to test accepted views and dogma. The latter were often found to be severely wanting. Increasingly, too, from the seventeenth century science gained momentum and intellectual hegemony. Belief in progress and the benefits of civilisation (meaning its British and European manifestations) followed largely unchecked, while industrial and technical advances promised a utopian future but delivered the million-fold slaughter of the First and Second World Wars. The predomination of reason seemed to lead inexorably to unimaginable barbarism and

[21] White moved between Australia and England between 1912 and 1946, as White outlines in his autobiography *Flaws in the Glass*.

bloodshed. White witnessed the decline and threatened collapse of the West, initially during the London Blitz, then as an intelligence officer between 1940 and 1946. Intellectually and emotionally, this prepared him for major personal changes and for new landscapes that were moral, spiritual, and deeply personal in their implication.

A half-conscious quest was initiated by his wartime experience, taking him first to Greece and then back to his childhood roots in Australia. As White explains in "The Prodigal Son" (1958), Greece proved interesting not just for its classical culture but, he underlines, for its timeless landscapes and opportunities for human connection: "perfection presents itself on every hand, not only the perfection of antiquity, but that of nature, and the warmth of human relationships expressed in daily living" (14). White found joy in a world of ancient monuments and reverberating legends, of pure scenes infused with classical forms and warm dispositions, as distinct from London's depressing urban sprawl and often industrialised countryside. What Australia offered the returnee, however, was even more primal, his responses profoundly visceral.

But rather than flooding back to his creative "palette" (16) upon his return, as "The Prodigal Son" (1958) suggests, the Australian landscape is already integral to White's earliest fiction from the 1930s and 40s. Australia may not have had the longstanding written histories or classical architecture of Europe, but it offered untrammelled space and unique natural wonders. In a later essay "In the Making" (1969), White is more equivocal about the creative gifts of repatriation than he was in "The Prodigal Son": "It's a good thing to be close to one's roots," White wrote, before also noting, "It's a good thing, too, to spend some time away from them; it enriches your work" (20), citing the likes of Christina Stead and Martin Boyd as examples of how fruitful expatriation could be. But for his own writing, White preferred Australia "because there are no distractions. It would be so boring if I didn't write" (20). What was often perceived as a lack of depth in the Antipodes struck White equally as an

opportunity for reflection and innovation. This experience of Australia—its offering of space and time, without distraction, and close to the "scenes of childhood" ("In the Making" 20)—had comforted him from his time as a jackeroo, when he began writing *Happy Valley* (1939),[22] throughout his time in Europe, and upon his return. What changed for White was not so much his relationship to Australian landscapes or their emotional and imaginative centrality, but Europe. War, destruction, and intellectual upheaval cemented White's emotional connection to the countryside of his youth and positioned him to see, with greater insight and clarity, the many gifts that such a relatively unspoiled and undeveloped land could offer—and crucially, the powers of perception that it required of its inhabitants.

White's Early Novels

Certainly, there is no reason to question White's profound awareness of this Old World-New World dichotomy and its potential creative consequences. What should be interrogated, as his first novels demonstrate, is when this binary produced significant imaginative fruits. Despite presenting his former self as a potential prototypal Londoner, his early writing gives few signs of an exclusively European mindset.[23] Instead the novels represent a clear creative progression from physical to psychological landscapes, culminating in their combination in *The Aunt's Story* (1948). Importantly, Australia as a potent alternative and landscape is already apparent in his first published work, *Happy Valley* (1939). The major breakthrough in his second novel, *The Living and the Dead* (1941), concerns the development of imaginative terrains. Here were two major components of White's later oeuvre, while in *The Aunt's Story* (1948)

[22] In his autobiography, White discusses the setting in which he wrote *Happy Valley* (1939) and the comfort it brought him: "the actual, noble, though often harsh and bitter Monaro scene was my spiritual sustenance in the year I spent working there" (*Flaws in the Glass* 49). It was, in contrast, "the inhabitants, either then, or again on returning to Australia after World War II'" that led to his pronounced sense of isolation (49).

[23] It is worth noting that there is some slippage between White's use of the terms British and European. From an antipodean perspective, the two are often considered in tandem, though this is often mistakenly conflated. In keeping with White's use of the terms, the two will at times be used interchangeably to refer to White's experience of the region, which included time in both Britain and the greater European continent.

landscape is both primal and dependent on the consciousness of an individual eye. This far conceptually White had demonstrably travelled before he returned to Australia in 1946 with the manuscript of *The Aunt's Story* already in hand. What the re-encounter with post-war Australia would mean for White appeared in ensuing novels, although even these are presumably infused with earlier insights. The character Voss, he claimed, was suggested in part by oversized megalomaniacs bestriding the world stage, while the dilemmas faced by Himmelfarb and Alf Dubbo were also arguably apparent to him before stepping ashore.

Although White suggested in "The Prodigal Son" that his early works amounted to "nil," contemporaneous criticism disagreed. Encouraging reviews of *Happy Valley* (1939) can be found in *Desiderata* and *Australian National Review* (13). The former describes *Happy Valley* as a "tragic, significant novel" and commends White's "quick eye for the humours and details and colours of existence," suggesting he "has a feeling for life, and he knows how to build details into a really compelling narrative"' (15). Similarly perceptive, HJ Oliver in *Australian National Review* concludes that "the novel will not please all; but it should provoke thought," which scarcely constitutes an indictment (90). Fairmindedly, Oliver cites adverse judgements of the novel, including a reported review describing it as "unhappy reading" and "sans periods … sans sense" (90).[24] This is balanced by the positive reception of *Happy Valley* by several notable figures, including Graham Greene, who described the work as "the most interesting novel of Australian life … since D. H. Lawrence's 'Kangaroo,'" and Herbert Read, who celebrated White's style for its "unusual beauty" (qtd. in Oliver 90). These verdicts suggested considerable authorial strengths that should mature, and indeed they did.

In *Happy Valley*, White establishes three key ideas that become central to his ongoing depiction of the landscape. Firstly, White responds to and supplements established depictions of the Australian environment. Secondly, antipodean terrains are consistently compared to

[24] Oliver does not provide a container or author for this review.

those of the Old World—and it is the Australian landscape, not that of Europe, which emerges as the more ancient, vital, and promising. And finally, from White's first published novel, human connection to the natural world is inhibited by various aspects of Australian settlement, including formal possession of the land and its commercial uses.

The author of *Happy Valley* is fully apprised of traditional settler responses to local landscapes and determined to use them as he saw fit. White cannot have failed to know the less than flattering accounts of the Great South Land given by early mariners, nor its later frequent identification with barrenness, wilderness, and various sanity-testing trials. Its allegedly "weird melancholy" lived on in diverse fictions (Clarke, "Preface to Adam Lindsay Gordon's *Sea Spray and Smoke Drift*" 45). He may also have read the seminal accounts offered by such soon-to-be canonised figures as Marcus Clarke and Henry Handel Richardson. Importantly, too, he was certainly familiar with the recent fictional depictions (now all but forgotten) of his contemporaries, such as Frederic Manning's *Middle Parts of Fortune* (1929), which seems to have inspired some of White's more memorable phrases:

> His face, too, was a blank from weariness, but he stood erect, an ash-stick under his arm, as the dun coloured shadows shuffled into some sort of order … they moved off in fours, away from the crest of the ridge, towards the place they called Happy Valley. (5)

These "dun-coloured shadows" probably influenced White's famous invective "dun-coloured realism," while the ironic use of "Happy Valley" as a place name—in Manning's case an indictment of the futility of war—is similarly sardonic in White's first novel.[25] This scene from Manning's novel also prefigures White's haunting description of Oliver Halliday arriving at the Western Front mere days after the war's completion. *Happy Valley*, as we shall see, brings the passions of Manning's war-torn Europe into Australia, suggesting that war—

[25] The potential shared allusion to Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas* (1759) will be discussed in further detail as the chapter progresses.

and significantly, what drives it—is as realisable in a remote Australian town as it is in a European city.

White did not need to return to the Australian cradle to spread his imaginative wings: inspirational, conceptual "pay dirt" was already laid down in his mind. He was not destined to be one of the hapless schoolmasters or journalists who he would depict as dominating the feeble intellectual heights of this homeland ("The Prodigal Son" 15). He would soar far above them, rediscovering and reinventing. The land called for a poetic translation and radical rethinking. Fittingly, *Happy Valley* opens with just such an aerial overview that concludes:

> But the country was old, older than the forest at Fontainebleau, there was an underlying bitterness that had been scored deep and deep by time, with a furrow here and there and pockmarks in the face of black stone. (15)

The Old World is not the old country of which White writes; rather the so-called New World is the place of these most ancient lands that are the subject of White's pen. This description of the Australian landscape emphasises its primal, immeasurable past, thereby inverting long-standing comparisons that foregrounded the historical depth of European civilisations and the fledgling status of the colonies. Similarly, evidence of scoring "deep and deep by time" lends a new, as yet unexplained, kind of complexity to Australian terrains. Rather than the harsh aspects of the environment suggesting hostility or indifference, these descriptions imply a degree of "inevitable bitterness," a continuing effect of its grand age and stature. In brief, the Australian landscape is being reimagined with a vengeance. Instead of characterising the continent as "The New World" or "Great South Land," White emphasises its less commonly known and understood features. Whereas the history and resonances of Fontainebleau fill learned and famous tomes, for White equivalent antipodean settings still await adequate treatment.

Though early settlers like Barron Field had underscored the continent's so-called belatedness, indeed its status as a veritable "after-birth," White suggests that the gifts of the Australian landscape are simply yet to be revealed ("Kangaroo" 14). The opening lines of the novel capture this sense of possibility and introduce the Australian terrain as benevolent, remote, and unexpectedly wintery:

> It had stopped snowing. There was a mesh of cloud over the fragile blue that sometimes follows snow. The air was very cold. In it a hawk lay, listless against the moving cloud, magnetized no doubt by some intention still to be revealed. (3)

Accustomed to envisioning Australia as a "sunburnt country, a land of sweeping plains" (Mackellar 388), the image of a snow-covered Australia, "fragile blue," filled with flora and fauna is unfamiliar both to local readers, most of whom have always lived on the temperate coastline, and to an international audience. Rather than a country of barren surfaces, there are depths here "still to be revealed," whether in the unexpected diversity of the environment, the intriguing reference to "intention," or the ensuing description of a "volcano" which "might not be extinct" (15). But much like his protagonists, the young White appears unsure of what exactly the landscape is poised to reveal, or how one might access a more complete vision of the land.

This sense of an unspoken, subterranean Australia awaiting realisation resounds throughout *Happy Valley*. Employing the images of abjection that became characteristic of his later work, White likens the town to a scab which might one day "drop off":[26]

[26] In "Abjection and Compassion: Affective Corporeality in Patrick White's Fiction" (2012), Bridget Grogan introduces Kristeva's theories of abjection in relation to the "surrender" of White's characters "to – as opposed to their transcendence of – embodiment" (93). While Grogan focuses on this experience in *The Living and the Dead*, it is also evident in White's first novel and recurs throughout his oeuvre. From images of volcanos potentially erupting or scabs on the land being peeled away in *Happy Valley*, through to a "gob of spittle" in *The Tree of Man* (478), and the repeated image of "crumbs" in *Riders in the Chariot* (48, 94, 160, 231, 249, 620, 637), images of abjection and a supplication to the material world and embodied aspects of existence are characteristic of White. As Bridget Grogan observes, such imagery constitutes a supplication to, rather than a transcendence of, "embodiment" (93). One might also suggest, however, that the difference in the two experiences in White is sequential: supplication to embodiment always precedes its transcendence. This idea is broached at the end of Grogan's article, where she states, "the moments in which White's characters transcend

> in summer when the slopes were a scurfy yellow and the body of the earth was very hot, lying there stretched out, the town, with its cottages of red and brown weatherboard, reminded you of an ugly scab somewhere in the body of the earth. It was so ephemeral. Some day it would drop off, leaving a pink, clean place underneath. (28)

White evokes the Australian landscape with images of vital, animal beings juxtaposed with restorative dead tissue, offering a compelling combination of life and dormancy, and the possibility of renewal. An "ugly" and inert covering, the "scab" is aligned with settlers, who are depicted as living on the surface of the country and without roots. These "cottages of red and brown weatherboard" do little to offer meaningful connection to the land, contributing only "a nice sort of unconscious colour," not unlike the "dun-coloured realism" White later decried ("The Prodigal Son" 16). In contrast to this symbol of human civilisation, a transient adornment, the land is alive, even animal: the earth "was very hot, lying there stretched out." There is promise in this discordance, however, as the narrator suggests that the "scab" covering Australia will inevitably "drop off." Rather than foregrounding the beige portents of civilisation, or the settler cottages, White focuses on what these "scabs" might conceal and perhaps protect: a "pink clean place underneath." In this regard, the metaphor of the scab advances White's characterisation of the Australian landscape as a place of possibility, even regeneration, with the full extent of its powers and secrets "still to be revealed" (*Happy Valley* 3).[27]

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their identities, and seemingly the material world, are in fact deeply imbricated with his close attention to corporeality" (105). In White's first and often overlooked novel, he establishes an early form of an enduring exploration of transcendence through a visceral engagement with the earth and its material matter.

[27] White's epidermal imagery persisted throughout his later novels and has been linked to his greater project of finding the "extraordinary in the ordinary" ("The Prodigal Son" 15). Brigid Rooney, for example, suggests that White's "epidermal preoccupation is political … Because a focus on the banality of surfaces, as prime site for the production of deep feelings, strikingly coheres with White's desire to make the ordinary yield the extraordinary" (*Literary Activists: Writer-Intellectuals and Australian public life* 51). Though Rooney traces this "epidermal preoccupation" from *The Solid Mandala* (46), it arguably found its first expression at the very outset of White's career in *Happy Valley* (1939).

Although White had not, in his own estimation, found "the mystery and the poetry" of the Australian landscape by 1939, the narrator of *Happy Valley* appears to suspect its existence beyond his basically English preoccupations ("The Prodigal Son" 15). From the first chapter, a sense of the arcane and metaphysical is assigned to the landscape, while descriptions often read like a dramatisation of White's later wish to "write the texture of music, the sensuousness of paint" ("The Prodigal Son" 16). In the scenes describing Oliver Halliday's time in Europe, normal categories collapse, and contraries are expanded and transcended. White's prose challenges customary perceptions and reveals an unsuspected, latent spiritual dimension:

> The music came rushing out of the loft, unfurling banners of sound. You could touch it. You could feel it. You could feel a stillness and a music all at once. You were at once floating and stationary in time, all time, and space, without barrier, passing with a fresher knowledge of the tangible to a point where this dissolved, became spiritual. (16-17)

A key word is "dissolved," the merely material is leavened first by music, then yields up a potentially spiritual dimension. Over the course of a few pages, White continues to alternate between different senses and locations, all of which coalesce in Halliday's mind:

> he was at home again, but not at home, it was in the church in the neighbourhood of the Luxembourg, it was in France, with old German Bach streaming out of the organ loft, and the War had stopped. (16)

Like layers of paint merging into a unified image, White's stream-of-consciousness narration brings different aspects of sensory experience and perception into a single vision.

Whereas Europe is identified with known patterns and cultural unity, the to the settler mind antipodean land is still challenging and largely uncharted. The easy flow associated with

Old World settings contrasts sharply with the staccato, fragmented phrases depicting the Australian terrain:

> A great boulder of black rock rose nakedly at the edge of the whitened road. He stopped and kicked at it with his ski. The tangible. There is a stubborn, bitter ring if you kick at a piece of black rock. And how would serene, Christian, German, eighteenth-century Johann Sebastian have dealt with a lump of antipodal rock? Serenity perhaps was the effect of environment, not so much the result of spiritual conflict. (17)

Here, the subtle motions of an established civilisation are broken by the hard reality of a dawning Antipodes—the "great boulder of black rock rose nakedly at the edge of the whitened road." The power of the local landscape and its distinction from a European setting are highlighted by this pronounced stylistic change. Australian nature is presented as intransigent, unyielding, and far removed from the environments that promoted German musical creativity and its often-Christian cultural context. Halliday initially wonders if "antipodal rock" might prevent the development of serenity, presumably as opposed to the undulating hills and bucolic terrains of Europe. Yet the next sentence in the excerpt states that "serenity perhaps was the effect of environment, not so much the result of spiritual conflict," implying that peace and consolation might be offered by the natural world after all (17). Tangible and immoveable, antipodal rock provides an image of obdurate constancy amid "spiritual conflict," powerfully prefiguring the claims White later made of the Australian landscape (17).

Despite his original misgivings about the spiritual potential of the antipodal environment, Halliday realises that the Australian landscape might offer a different kind of serenity to Europe. Falling in the snow, he remains there momentarily, startled by this sudden intervention of the natural world:

> So he lay back on the cold snow, to consider the situation, and it was good and cold lying there, the way the ribs moved with his panting in and out. […] He laughed … He was laughing up at a patch of sky that looked rather chaste and bewildered in the scud of cloud. (17-18)

Halliday's decision not to struggle against the environment but to "lay back on the cold snow" suggests his supplication to the natural world. The experience, he decides, is a positive one—"it was good and cold lying there … He laughed." The heavens are empty but not dispiriting.

The description of Halliday and his humility in the face of Australian nature foreshadows White's recollection of his own spiritual conversion, penned some fifty years later. Physical parallels, including a fall in nature, gazing at the sky, and a turn to laughter, are accompanied by similar metaphorical resonances. Like his description of Halliday's experiences, White's autobiography *Flaws in the Glass* (1981) recalls a sense of communion with the natural world as well an acknowledgment of his minor place within it:

> I lay where I had fallen, half-blinded by rain, under a pale sky, cursing through watery lips a God in whom I did not believe. I began laughing finally, at my own helplessness and hopelessness, in the mud and the stench from my filthy old oilskin. (144)

Although he never drew attention to the similarity in the passages, it appears, at least in his fictional work, that the Australian landscape held spiritual significance for White years before he came to write directly about his own parallel experiences of it. In his memoir, White places his development of spiritual faith as occurring between the publication of *The Aunt's Story* (1948) and *The Tree of Man* (1955) (*Flaws in the Glass* 144), but *Happy Valley* (1939) suggests that the seeds of this conversion, or at least an anticipatory glimpse, were already present for White in his discernment of the Australian landscape.

Standing in the way of this spiritual unfolding is humankind and its proud material achievements. The landscape is presented as ready to share its bounty, but the individual is cast as reluctant and recalcitrant, there is "no reciprocation":

> The frost thawed early under the sun. But all this was incidental, you felt, there was no reciprocation on the part of man, almost no connection with the earth, or else it took longer for the corresponding tendency to penetrate and touch the instincts with which he is endowed. It was like this, very slow, until with an undertone of protest that time ignored, flowing blandly, even through Happy Valley it flowed, he was caught up, whatever his private argument might be, and pitched beyond reach of his own intentions. (137)

Human diffidence has forestalled the fruits of the land and a connection to the earth, but a metamorphosis is underway—the preposition "until" hints at discovery (137). Worse still is the obtuseness or blindness of pastoralists like Glen Marsh. Not only does Marsh subscribe to imported standards and practices but presumably unimproved bush land holds for him few charms. Here, for example, the human relationship to the land is almost procedural, passing through generations like any other form of capital. Instead of connecting him to the environment, conventionally owning and working on the land only produces further disjunction. Despite his apparent immersion in the natural world, Marsh remains thoroughly alienated from it.

In other words, when the chief significance of the landscape is monetary, its spiritual aspect becomes obscured. This is shown in the closing pages of *Happy Valley* when Australia is described as "the country of the future," in some ways prefiguring the more hopeful direction of White's later novels (393). Yet this sense of hope is soon undercut when Mr Belper adds that such promise and futurity are dependent on the land as a "source of economic advancement" (393). He states: "Australia's bound to come out on top. Look at the

interior, he said. I ask you. What a chance for development" (393). In addition, there are townsfolk themselves and their penchant for material progress. "Possessions," the narrator concludes, "are tragically adaptable" (406). That is, the desire to own and contain, customary within colonial and industrial ideologies and their infrastructure, is not determined by any given environment but adapts to them. Whether as a pastoral holding or as potential mineral wealth, conventional human engagement with the land in *Happy Valley* is predicated on capital gain. Fittingly the novel ends with the flight of characters to what will hopefully prove more benign locales, unaware that they carry the seeds of darkness and despair within themselves. They, not the landscape, are the cause of failure, so that ultimately Happy Valley is "anywhere" (404).

White's second novel, *The Living and the Dead* (1941), builds upon key themes introduced in its precursor and adds an important focus on subjective and imaginative terrains. Here the author experiments with interiority, but its full visionary strengths are yet to be discerned. Though advancing ideas that become central to his later depictions of the Australian landscape, *The Living and the Dead* is set in an urban European environment during the interwar years. While *Happy Valley* (1939) considers the disconnection of its protagonists from the natural world and each other, White's second novel reflects on subjectivity itself as inherently isolating. In this respect, a key landscape is added to the author's "palette": the human mind ("The Prodigal Son" 16). Despite being set in a European city, the narrator also adds a new perspective on the Australian environment: namely, that it might serve as a viable alternative to the so-called Old World, offering not only a geographic antipode but also a psychological and imaginative one.

While the initial reception of *The Living and the Dead* was more mixed than *Happy Valley*, the novel still attracted attention from several key publications, including *The Times Literary Supplement* (*TLS*), *Meanjin*, *Australian Book Review*, and *Southerly*. The review in

TLS was largely unforgiving, describing White's egotism as "flapping too loud and too constantly" (321). Later appraisals of the novel in *Meanjin* and *Southerly* came with its reissue and provide the contrasting views of two key Australian literature academics, RF Brissenden and HP Heseltine. While Brissenden suggests that *The Living and the Dead* was "so close to Virginia Woolf in theme, style, and structure that in places it reads almost like a parody" (414), Heseltine commends the same aspects of the novel for rendering "[White's] chosen segment of English society with both density and *finesse*" (211). Heseltine singles out *The Living and the Dead* as a significant novel, standing "at the threshold of the major phase" and in this respect proving to be one of White's "most individual and important work[s]" (213). These local reviews are far more balanced than White's own, much later estimation of "the wretched book" that "should not have been written" (*Flaws in the Glass* 77).

Later scholarship suggests the foundational role of interiority and the significance of the novel in White's developing oeuvre. In "Patrick White's The Living and the Dead—A Struggle for Identity" (1994), Thomas L Warren argues that the novel's main character "Elyot represent[s] for White the potential he faced had he remained in London and the war had not interfered" (40). In this regard, the novel is an expression of White's own self-image, which Warren contends was one of an intellectual but emotionally void figure. More recently in "Abjection and Compassion: Affective Corporeality in Patrick White's Fiction" (2012), Bridget Grogan considers *The Living and the Dead* (1941) in terms of embodiment and abjection. Acknowledging that the novel is "often sidelined in critical discussions," Grogan proposes that many of White's major preoccupations, including the "dialectical tension between abjection and compassion," appear in his early works (93). While Grogan focuses on Elyot's relationship to his own physicality, she notes his "alienation from the physical" and "compelling desire to merge empathically with others" (98), touching on the competing forces of interiority and yearning for connection. Likewise, in her later monograph *Reading*

Corporeality in Patrick White's Fiction: An Abject Dictatorship of the Flesh (2018), Grogan underlines the degree to which many of White's characters experience "sensual immersion in the landscape" (247), tracing its early recordings in White's second novel. Though emphasising *The Living and the Dead* as a significant part of White's work, these accounts are less concerned with the connection between interiority (as opposed to corporeality) and the author's natural worlds.

Already in his second novel, personal and imaginative terrains begin to emerge as the only inalienable ones. This idea is introduced at the outset of *The Living and the Dead*, when the reader is told of Elyot Standish continuing "homeward, through the landscape of his own mind, through the remoter geography of Ebury Street" (11), much as Kitty soon will be "walking in her own landscape" (53). In White's hands, landscape is already a physical analogue of the inner self, and the power and potential of imaginative landscapes obviously have significant ramifications for his later work.

Throughout *The Living and the Dead*, White's landscapes are developed in three primary ways. First, as in *Happy Valley*, the "Old Worlds" of Europe and England are contrasted with the "New Worlds" of Australia and America. Secondly, interiority and imagination are foregrounded as major themes of the novel. While Bill Ashcroft observed that both of "White's early novels … make much of the separateness of the soul," *The Living and the Dead* unquestionably foregrounds it ("Magda Meets Theodora" 3). Finally, these two ideas lead to a developing notion of landscapes of the mind. Although revelation still awaits his characters, White's second novel suggests that it is drawing closer. From *The Living and the Dead* onwards, imagination becomes the key focus of his Australian landscapes, and it is arguably this change in perspective, beyond any other, that constitutes the most profound shift in his fictional work.

The European countryside in *The Living and the Dead* is richly illustrative of White's growing dissatisfaction with the Old Word. It colours his choice of settings. Typically, he describes a "stretch of barren marsh" (276) or elsewhere "irrelevant figure[s]" in its "winter landscape" (25), and there is a repeated emphasis on decay. In fact, White reconfigures, even reverses, received responses to seasonal landscapes. The green that might elsewhere recall an idyllic spring countryside or shoots of new growth refers here to a disintegrating, organic sludge:

> Everything in Germany was too green. There was a hectic, feverish tone about the undergrowth, from which you could detach a smell, strange and repellent, of rotting leaves. (125)

While White's observations are accurate and capture peculiarly Australian insights ("too green" is arguably in contrast to the pallid, washed out green or pale yellows of Australia), they also reflect White's growing disenchantment with Europe and its landscapes.

As opposed to the waning empires of the Continent, the Antipodes of *The Living and the Dead* offers a potential site of post-war renewal, with complex ramifications. For example, lying in bed together, Willy Standish describes his dreams of escape to his lover and future wife, Kitty Goose: "After the war, Willy was saying, as if it would end, ever, he was thinking about Australia, he said" (89). Australia is identified with key hopes and imaginings, both that the war might end and that other worlds—offering unspoiled land, space, and potential—await discovery.

Despite the predominance of landscapes of the mind, Australia still offers a serious alternative to the supposed Old World. While Veronica Brady suggested that Happy Valley represents "a place whose inhabitants had most frighteningly failed to take hold of life, a failed utopia of a sick civilisation," there are signs of a viable utopia in *The Living and the Dead* ("God, History, and Patrick White" 130). Compared to the perceived sophistication and

civilised history of the Old World, Australia is "apples"—as Kitty offers—a provincial but still relatively untouched Eden (*The Living and the Dead* 89). And fittingly, their child will be named Eden. This note of utopianism has been interestingly expanded by Robyn Walton to include "utopian alternatives to the Old," which here are generational as well as territorial (63).[28]

Interiority, however, is a complex terrain, its consequences far from straightforward. How communicable and commensurate, for instance, are individual terrains? For example, before Willy interrupts to offer his vision of a new life, the reader is immersed in Kitty's thoughts:

> Allowing him to talk about home, you heard your foot slur along the gravel in the stillness of a green evening, heard the breath catch on the desperate approach, the hand felt, and the texture of strange clothes. It was not exactly physical. You were too detached. Like stroking a dog. (89)

The use of second person and the intensity of the response underscores its peculiarity and the extent to which individual minds remain almost impenetrable spheres. Reality is a subjective, rather than universal, experience. Despite their physical intimacy, Kitty and Willy occupy divergent imaginative realms. While her lover dreams of escape, Kitty is anchored firmly in the sensory present of her surrounding—the foot that slurs "along the gravel," the desperate breath, the hands and clothes that touch. Yet without a shared imaginative space or connection, such moments are "not exactly physical." The passage captures the fundamental

[28] In addition, such desires are not simply for a different life or landscape, but for the new self it might require or shape. In "Ladies and Gentlemen? Language, Body and Identity in The Aunt's Story and The Twyborn Affair" (2013), Grogan suggests that White "gestures towards a utopian selfhood associated with a prelapsarian innocence … lost in the acquisition of language and enculturation" (60). In other words, the yearning for Australia as a New World, or as a place of post-war promise and renewal, answers the primal desire to restore humanity to an untouched and Edenic state, however fanciful. White's protagonists in *The Living and the Dead* are, for the most part, steeped in changing perceptions rather than realities. But these as-yet perceptively ill-equipped characters struggle to perceive the world anew, overwhelmed by an interiority that remains ultimately isolating, even alienating, rather than revelatory or liberating.

isolation of even lovers, together with the tendency of humans to live invisible lives within incommunicable mental spaces—a distinct conceptual development from *Happy Valley.*

Alongside interiority, isolation is characteristic of the intimate relationships in *The Living and the Dead.* The marriage between Kitty and Willy, for example, is marked by impenetrable separateness and suspended connection. Despite being in love, their attempts at communication soon lapse into habit, even cliché—reaching out to each other is "detached. Like stroking a dog" (89). Their fundamental division, which is tied to their innate interiority or discrete subject positions, reduces their relationship to a "charade" of close attachment, which is enacted "for all you were worth" (37). White's potentially deliberate and poignant re-use of this turn of phrase recalls the claims in *Happy Valley* that the population were preoccupied with swinging the rattle "for all your worth" (15). In both cases, the phrase suggests that individuals are occupied by basic amusements that distract from the true nature of things. Connection, be it to the land or to other people, remains elusive. Moreover, these habits are not transitory but involve their entire beings: they are invested "for all you were worth" (*The Living and the Dead* 37). Whether occupied by a rattle or charade, a toy for distraction or a fiction enacted, access to truth, reality, and meaning is out of reach for these characters. The subsequent retreat inwards is significant because it prefigures the emergence of personal and imaginative terrains as the only inalienable ones in White's oeuvre.

In a mirror to these inner terrains, the alienation and interiority of Elyot are commonly set in distinct urban landscapes. For example, Elyot is often described as experiencing a sense of existential alienation in public spaces, such as a crowded town square. Despite being in public he feels "his own isolation. This was frequent in public places. In your own time, in your own silence, you could count the stones of the public desert places" (259). Already, anticipating its apogee in *Voss* (1957), White's desert is a metaphor for human emptiness. In a further foreshadowing of *Voss*, Elyot is depicted as a lone figure almost engulfed by this

urban expanse, isolated by the realisation of his own inevitable mortality: "Shorn of any of the material ties, he had stood and watched the unconscious faces of those who had not shared his revelation" (259). There is no transcendence, resolution, or perpetuity for Elyot, however, and the novel ends with this sense of unmet possibility.

Vitally, too, the conclusion of *The Living and the Dead* suggests that the alienating experience of interiority might be overcome. The novel ends "exactly where it began, with Elyot Standish seeing his sister Eden off at a railway station" (During 97). Elyot Standish is on a bus "bound nowhere in particular" (*The Living and the Dead* 358). A sense of individual severance initially seems unqualified: "If only to touch these almost sentient faces into life, to reach across the wastes of sleep and touch into recognition …" (358). Yet the last line suggests the beginning of new possibilities: "He felt like someone who had been asleep, and had only just woken" (357). Despite unrealised potential, Elyot is on the verge of revelation. Thus, though the Australian landscape had long been a prominent and positive force in White's fiction, it took a change in characterisation for this power to be harnessed and for an unorthodox but meaningful possession of the land to occur.[29]

White's Return to Terra Australis

The Aunt's Story (1948) marks a transition between White's early and post-war fiction, reflecting a development that locates in Australian nature crucial grounds for hope. This is accompanied by developments in characterisation rather than setting. The novel's epigraph

[29] This idea of a meaningful possession of the land, which is meaningful in part because it is derived internally through imagination, is underlaid with imperial drivers. As an avowed and outspoken Republican, Patrick White certainly saw himself as advancing a distinctly settler-Australian identity and connection to place, but he seemed largely oblivious to the overlapping of settler-Australian identity and British imperialism, despite having strong ties to both countries. Perhaps it was aspirational, and he simply hoped for a time that settler-Australians might establish a unique identity and sense of place, but he does not engage with the idea that the pursuit of this kind of Australian identity is also colonial. It is potentially unavoidably colonial, but he consistently saw imagination as somehow insulated from the culture it was produced in. I will address this at greater length in Chapter Three and Four.

from Olive Schreiner extends upon the idea, outlined in *The Living and The Dead* (1941), of interiority as a source of disconnection:

> She thought of the narrowness of the limits within which a human soul may speak and be understood by its nearest of mental kin, of how soon it reaches that solitary land of individual experience, in which no fellow footfall is ever heard. (9)

As the epigraph of *The Aunt's Story*, the excerpt frames both Theodora's isolation and her apparent descent into madness. Individuals, the reader is told, necessarily operate within the narrow margins of their own perception. In addition, the epigraph from part three—"When your life is most real, to me you are mad," also from Schreiner—suggests the specious assumption that objective realities exist, and perhaps even a surer sign of madness than Theodora's unconventional life (253).

Part of White's challenge to dun-coloured realism came in the form of depicting the inner reality and imaginative lives of his characters, or in Schreiner's words the "solitary land of individual experience" (*The Aunt's Story* 9). The landscape is also implicated in this shift in focus. As Ann McCulloch states:

> All of Patrick White's protagonists are disturbed, alienated seers. They suffer socially in their estrangement as much as they revel in their difference. White steeps himself in the Australian landscape which is invoked to express a state of mind rather than to deliver it solely for itself. (265)

The landscape is instrumental to White's portrayal of an individual's inner life, and this is no less true of his formative works. Unlike his early fiction, however, *The Aunt's Story* considers the necessity and potential solace of these personal, imaginative terrains together with the impenetrable distance—even disconnection—that they can create. Interiority here is not ultimately isolating but liberating.

This change in outlook is supported by structural changes in White's written work. His first two novels are almost play-like in format, with ensemble casts performing discrete roles, which reinforces White's thematic emphasis on multiplicity, anonymity, and disconnection. In contrast, *The Aunt's Story* focuses on a single character—the protagonist is clearly defined, and the narrative comparatively linear. With the number of characters reduced, Theodora has the space to emerge in detail and complexity as White's first fully formed, visionary character. While both Dr Halliday and Elyot Standish are portrayed as having the capacity to perceive the world around them in some depth, this potential is never totally realised. To penetrate further they would arguably have to forego their relatively conventional, middle-class lives, something they are not prepared to do.

The novel as social canvas is replaced by the novel of introspection. Hence, unlike Elyot or Dr Halliday, Theodora has no companion or close family, lives largely in isolation, and is disconnected from the world. What she gains, however, more than compensates for these shortfalls: she receives complete insight into, and ultimately transcendence of, the material world. The vital key to Theodora's ascension is a sustained connection to the natural world around her, which comes largely in the form of the Australian landscape.

The Aunt's Story centres on the figure of an Australian spinster, Theodora Goodman, and her increasing disconnection from reality. Over the course of the novel, her incremental removal to the margins of sane and civil society is the same kind of exile which becomes characteristic of White's later visionary figures—the further these characters move away from social mores and institutions, the closer they come to harnessing deeper truths and realities. Thus, her alienation from the conventional and customary signals her transcendence to a higher plane, rather than her failure to meet the demands of this one. From the falsity of fences and hypocrisy of houses, through to the suggestion that empirical reality obscures the real gifts of the landscape, *The Aunt's Story* consistently portrays Theodora's exile as a form

of freedom. Though "remote from most people" she is "close to the living quick of the world" (22), as Fiona McFarlane notes. And it is this "living quick" that will come increasingly into its own. Ultimately Theodora is free because she learns to see and live beyond the social structures that oppressed White's earlier characters.

Much of the secondary literature on *The Aunt's Story* notes a deviation from White's early work, suggesting its place as his first major novel. In 1975 Kirpal Singh described *The Aunt's Story* as "White's first really significant novel" (90). Over thirty years later in her 2013 article "Ladies and Gentlemen? Language, Body and Identity in *The Aunt's Story* and *The Twyborn Affair*," Bridget Grogan suggested that *The Aunt's Story* is widely considered White's "first great novel" (59). In "Going into Dreamland: From Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* to Patrick White's *The Aunt's Story*" (2015), Beston similarly describes White as "becoming increasingly ambitious as he began the series of his greatest works," which he dates from *The Aunt's Story* (244). The consensus among critical commentators is that *The Aunt's Story* reflects a distinct break from his first two novels, but this claim has not been thoroughly tested. Instead, as I demonstrate, in many ways *The Aunt's Story* is a natural development of White's first two novels.

To demonstrate the continuities and departures from White's early work, I trace three central ideas from *Happy Valley* (1939) and *The Living and the Dead* (1941) through to *The Aunt's Story* (1948). First, in each novel personal freedom is linked to the movement away from the supposed Old World, especially insofar as they are identified with "reason," empiricism, and faith in scientific as well as humanistic progress. In *The Aunt's Story*, this idea is reflected in White's portrayal of the Antipodes as an ancient land and promising alternative to a stagnant Old World, or indeed the brash materialism of its colonial cousins in America. Secondly, and despite these signs of promise, Australia has its own insufficiencies, and its potential remains limited by local attitudes to the land, reflected in markers of colonial

possession like fences and placenames. The final idea is connected to a search for liberation. Rather than freedom being in any specific place, even Australia or the natural world, the ending of *The Aunt's Story* presents its location as a state of mind. In the closing chapters of White's novel, most notably "Jardin Exotique" and "Holstius," the interiority that plagued White's characters in *Happy Valley* and *The Living and the Dead* becomes, for Theodora, a source of imagination, expansion, and liberation. She emerges, within White's oeuvre, as a "welcome deliverance from reason" (McFarlane 17).

The importance of freedom is apparent at the outset of *The Aunt's Story*. The opening page depicts Theodora as a child, almost exultant in her sense of liberation in the natural world:

> From the church across the bay a sound of bells groped through a coppery afternoon, snoozed in the smooth leaves of the Moreton Bay fig, and touched the cheek. The blood began to flow. I am free now, said Theodora Goodman. (*The Aunt's Story* 11)

This early declaration becomes aspirational as Theodora progresses into the adult world, foreshadowing her eventual return to a formative innocence in nature.[30] While Theodora's search for a "prelapsarian innocence" is realised at the end of the novel (Grogan, "Ladies and Gentlemen? Language, Body and Identity in *The Aunt's Story* and *The Twyborn Affair* 60), the final pages recall this opening scene when a child, Zack, "rubbed his cheek against her cheek" and "their blood flowed together" (*The Aunt's Story* 273). Impressions of nature and children are aligned with being brought to life. Theodora's journey towards this state, however, involves a movement from perceived Old Worlds to New.

The Aunt's Story is set across three continents—Australia, Europe, and America—and, as in the author's early work, the antipodean terrain is defined in contrast to these alternative

[30] It is perhaps not accidental that White described similar feelings upon his voyage home as a prodigal son. The author recalls "longing for the Australian landscape," a compulsion to "burn my European bridges," and a sense, among the scenes of his childhood, that he was "free to express myself again" ("The Nobel Prize" 42).

landscapes. While Australia and Europe are both associated with spectral imagery, this symbolism is deployed to very different ends.[31] For example, the landscape at Meroë is initially described as overlaying a "skeleton" land (20), inspiring parallels to Herodotus' ancient Egypt or Africa (23). In relation to White's Old World, however, spectral imagery evokes death and disintegration rather than reverberations of antiquity. Europe is a "gothic shell," in which "stone arches cracked," the wilderness ached, and "the ghosts of Homer and St Paul and Tolstoy waited for the crash" (139). While the crumbling Old World is on the edge of collapse, Australia offers undiscovered bounties and venerable nature. It is not, in White's eyes at least, awaiting European edification.

The characterisation of White's America provides a compelling contrast to the ancient skeleton lands of the Antipodes. Unlike its primordial cousin, the American landscape is triumphant, boldly declaring the apparent New World with "trumpeting … corn. Its full, yellow tremendous notes pressed close to the swelling sky" (255). But this image of brazen optimism is matched by impressions of devouring consumerism. On a train journey through the continent, the corn crops engulf the landscape, leaving room for little else: "It had taken up and swallowed all other themes, whether belting iron, or subtler, insinuating steel, or the frail human reed" (255). Not only is the land being mined for material wealth, but individuals are reduced to hollow, fragile husks. Amid the mass of maize plantations, Theodora has "retreated into her own distance and did not intend to come out" (255). While this also relates to her metamorphosis more generally, the response of a fellow passenger suggests the American landscape as a specific influence: he "talked, and heard his own voice made small. Because all this time the corn song destroyed the frailer human reed" (255). The repetition of

[31] White spent his second year as a jackeroo at Walgett and "wrote three rambling immature novels, fortunately never published" (*Flaws in the Glass* 46). He claims, however, that "bits" from these rejected novels "surfaced in later work" and "gave me the foundations of *The Aunt's Story*" (46). These links and continuities further suggest that the landscape was a consistent and positive influence established early in his life, rather than a revelation prompted by his return to Australian shores.

"frail human reed" emphasises the powerlessness of human resistance to technological and agricultural progress. The passenger becomes emblematic of the emotional toll of materialist cultures and arguably offers a shadowy portent for Australian civilisation:

> She heard the man's words, which were as significant and sad as the desperate hum of telephone wires, that tell of mortgages, and pie, and phosphates, and love, and movie contacts, and indigestion, and real estate, and loneliness. (256)

The sum of human existence is reduced to a dismal assortment of technology, capital, emotion, and bodily functions. The passenger punctuates his soliloquy on modern civilisation and its attendant woes by sharing the fact that "the population of Chicago had risen from 2,701,705 in 1920 to 2,276,438 in 1930" (236). On the same page, the reader is told through a letter from Fanny that Theodora has gone mad. But as the novel suggests,[32] the true madness rests not in Theodora but in the so-called progress of the Western world.

While ancient and emotionally moving, the Australian landscape is not exempt from the toll of material approaches to the land. White had always regarded Australia as a site of great promise, but the population itself was often found wanting. Throughout *The Aunt's Story*, such deficiencies are often evident in signposts of colonial possession because they capture the short-sightedness of attempts to connect with the land. For example, the fences that surround the Goodman property and that initially provide some comfort to Theodora are exposed early in the novel as meaningless demarcations, conferring neither possession nor security. Initially, "it was Our Place. Possession was a peaceful mystery" and "the fences were the last word in peace of mind" (24). Only a page later, however, the reader is told that the fences are in a hopeless state of disrepair and the land subject to being sold off (25). For

[32] This includes both the preceding treatise on the emotional costs of materialism and the chapter's epigraph. The epigraph reads: "When your life is most real, to me you are mad" and is taken from the first chapter of Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* (1883). Fanny has declared Theodora mad, but White's consistent characterisation of Fanny as vain and vacuous makes her pronouncement totally meaningless.

the local landowner, Mr Parrott, the lack of secure fencing demonstrates that "George Goodman has no sense of responsibility to his own land" (25). Yet, when the Goodman property is eventually sold, the fences are shown to no more ensure ownership than Theodora's childhood sense of the land as "Our Place" (24). Regardless of whether the fences are new and sturdy or old and disintegrating, their existence does nothing to facilitate an enduring connection to the surrounding environment.

Like fences, houses are mostly described as ornaments that overlay and obscure the land, but the Goodman house stands apart. Meroë is a "flat biscuit colour" and an "honest house" (20). The humility of its construction belongs to a former era in which property was built primarily to offer shelter—the design is simple like a child's "construction of blocks"—rather than signalling possession or material wealth (20). This humility is underscored by White's description of Meroë, which "stared surprised out of the landscape" (20). The narrator's defence of the original house for its unpretentious construction is highlighted by the comparison with contemporary buildings: "it had been put up at a time when the object of building was to make a house" and "the predominant quality in those who made it was honesty of purpose" (20). But, as the narrator reminds us, "this is something that gets overlaid by civilisation" and the new, emerging "houses by gable and portico" are equated with "the social hypocrisies" of "man" (20). In this regard, the narrator suggests that civil constructs increasingly reflect material and related drives, serving as a source of disconnection from, rather than integration with, the surrounding environment.

Additionally, Meroë represents a connection between the Australian landscape and Theodora as Romantic figures of childhood innocence. Gesturing towards the wonderment of Wordsworth's or Rousseau's romantic child-figures (Austin 75), in White's hands the Goodman house itself has assumed child-like properties. The combination of Meroë's apparent structure, composed of children's "construction blocks," and façade, staring

"surprised out of the landscape," suggests the house as a symbol of native guilelessness (*The Aunt's Story* 20). Such images of primordial humility offer parallels to the Australian landscape as a New World, emergent and unspoiled. There is a deeper symbolism here, however, in which these images of both Meroë and the Australian landscape foreshadow the protagonist's return to what Veronica Brady described as the "primitive sensorium" ("Patrick White and the Question of Woman" 186). In other words, Theodora is looking for a connection to the land that transcends the limits of childhood, colonial possession, and even nationhood. Ultimately, she seeks a visionary experience. Theodora, as Brady elaborates, is "a Ulysses figure, seeking to return home to the land of vision she knew as a child on her parents" property in Australia, named significantly Meroë' (*A Crucible of Prophets: Australians and the Question of God* 70). The name Meroë' is important because it is also "the name Herodotus gives to the capital of Abyssinia, traditionally the seat of the Happy Valley," connecting *The Aunt's Story* (1948) to both a quest of knowledge and White's first novel (*A Crucible of Prophets: Australians and the Question of God* 70).[33] While Meroë offers Theodora an innocence she associates with childhood, it remains conditional—dependent on inexperience and colonial possession of the land. Only in leaving does she discover an abiding solution in the incorruptible landscape of her imagination.

Like the symbol of Meroë, the act of place-naming has a complicated function throughout *The Aunt's Story*. While place-naming is an imaginative practice that creates a degree of settler belonging, it also obscures Indigenous precedence on the land, and in this

[33] The use of "Happy Valley" as a town name is certainly ironic in White, as in Johnson. In Johnson's *The History of Rasselas* (1759), Happy Valley "supplied its inhabitants with the necessaries of life" but there remain abiding "vacancies" (336). The protagonist Rasselas, with the aid of the philosopher Imlac, embarks on a journey out of Happy Valley and into the wider world—towards self-knowledge and experience. He returns wiser, perhaps with the kind of contentment his philosopher-companion expresses: "I am less unhappy than the rest, because I have a mind replete with images, which I can vary and combine at pleasure. I can amuse my solitude by the renovation of the knowledge which begins to fade from my memory, and by recollection of the accidents of my past life" (357). White's protagonists in *Happy Valley* do not yet possess a "mind replete of images," but Theodora is different. Theodora's meeting with Mrs Johnson and her son, Zack, at the end of the novel is crucial. It is Zack, of course, whose final touch seems to restore Theodora to innocence. Mrs Johnson, as Alan Lawson noted, also represents "a descendant of the great lexicographical Doctor, no doubt, whose refutation of the notion that reality was merely a mental construct was accomplished by firmly kicking a rock" (10).

regard merely instates different barriers to meaningful connection. In Meroë, for example, "exotic names" are assigned to the surrounding region and eventually become connected to it, having "eaten into the gnarled and aboriginal landscape and become a part of it" (*The Aunt's Story* 20). In time, this impression of devouring the "aboriginal landscape" (20) yields to that of a creative conspiracy between language and the natural world, foreshadowing White's later interest in conspiracies with nature in *The Riders in the Chariot* (1961). In *The Aunt's Story* (1948), "the hills" have "conspired with the name," changing in form to match it: "to darken, to split deeper open their black rock, or to frown with a fiercer, Ethiopian intensity" (20). Language thus creates, as Paul Carter famously argues in *The Road to Botany Bay* (1987), "a named network through which, and in terms of which, certain historical events might begin to occur" (92). A strange alliance is found between the locals, the land, and the "exotic names" given to the surrounding countryside, suggesting a course of empire that gradually attunes settlers to their surrounds: "their flat daily prose burst into sudden dark verse with Meroë in their mouths" (*The Aunt's Story* 20). In this regard, the reality of colonisation occurs not with the imposition of one culture onto another, but in a dynamic change of both the land and its inhabitants.

The phrase also recalls a key motif in *Happy Valley* (1939): that the land is poised to reveal something greater than conventional attitudes suggest. Having "burst" and then "smouldered" (*The Aunt's Story* 20), the fiery image of the landscape suggests its primal power and potential to be reignited. The ancient, vital force of the natural world is then reiterated in the following description of the surrounding tree line, which appears as "the abstractions of trees, with their roots in Ethiopia" (21). Far from an empty wasteland, White's Australian landscape is primeval and formidable. That this awaits Australian-born settlers, culturally set apart from the land they were born into, is brought into focus. For White, imagination is required to access the natural world meaningfully, and conventional means of

connection—fences, houses, and naming, for example—fall short. After all, they are instruments of the world his characters ultimately seek to escape. A more radical deviation is needed.

Set in the gardens of a French hotel, the second section of *The Aunt's Story,* "Jardin Exotique," is central to understanding the novel and resolves some of these key difficulties. Two significant ideas regarding landscape are advanced in this section, namely Theodora's burgeoning visionary power and the idea that her imaginative realm might hold more truth and even "reality" than an empirical one. While it is unclear at first whether "Jardin Exotique" takes place in a real or fanciful locale, it soon becomes apparent that the scenery belongs to Theodora's imagination. As John and Rose Marie Beston suggest in "The Several Lives of Theodora Goodman: The 'Jardin Exotique' Section of Patrick White's *The Aunt's Story*" (1975):

> In the cactus garden of a small hotel in southern France, this staid Australian spinster's imagination flares forth with the violence of sudden fire. The figures and events of the 'Jardin Exotique' section take place … entirely within Theodora's mind. (1)

Arguably the most exotic, fruitful, and meaningful landscape in the novel is a product of Theodora's imagination. In this regard, Theodora's loss of physical land holding and movement away from the family property paradoxically brings her closer to a truer, or at least more assured, claim on the land through imaginative possession. The early hints at a simmering power are realised in Theodora's kindled mind.

In "Jardin Exotique," the fragmentation and interiority that plagued White's early characters become an experience of transformative possibility. This metamorphosis is prefigured by the opening quote from Henry Miller, which speaks of being "split into myriad fragments, like an insect …that drinks in the atmosphere, we walk with sensitive filaments" and concludes by summarising the experience as "the great fragmentation of maturity" (133).

For Elyot Standish or Dr Halliday, such experiences of existential fracturing or detachment are often isolating. But for Theodora, it is a process of becoming, or of "maturity" (133). It is also paradoxically a process of return. The young Theodora who declared herself "free" in the opening scene of the novel has returned in the form, to borrow Bridget Grogan's adroit term, of a "prelapsarian innocence" ("Ladies and Gentlemen? Language, Body and Identity in The Aunt's Story and The Twyborn Affair" 60). In White's hands, maturity here denotes the capacity to return to simplicity and innocence in a byzantine adult world.

Throughout "Jardin Exotique" and part three of the novel "Holstius," the idea that physical geography transparently reflects reality is presented as a conceit. Upon her arrival at the Hôtel du Midi, Theodora hears echoes of "Moraïtis from his country of the bones," recalling a key conversation between the two characters earlier in the novel (137). In Theodora's first meeting with Moraïtis, he suggests that countries like Australia or Greece, countries "of bones" with sparse terrains, elicit clearer vision than their more urban European counterparts:

> "Bare," smiled Moraïtis, for a fresh discovery. "Greece, you see, is a bare country. It is all bones."
>
> "Like Meroë," said Theodora.
>
> "Please?" said Moraïtis.
>
> "I too come from a country of bones."
>
> "That is good," said Moraïtis solemnly. "It is easier to see." (108)

The idea, as Moraïtis continues, is that "it is not necessary to see things … If you know" (108). In other words, Moraïtis suggests that the truth of a land might be obscured by what appears on its surface, and that "true knowledge," as we discover later in White's oeuvre, emerges from interaction with the "country of the mind" (*Voss* 373). While *The Living and the Dead* (1941) suggested that landscapes of the mind exist, *The Aunt's Story* (1948) shows

them predominating over other geographies that merely track and trace objects on the surface of the earth.

Empirical facts, White suggests, can hide the truth of a land—and conversely, imagination might reveal them. In "Jardin Exotique," the landscapes of the mind are not only crucial but transcend empirical reality. This idea is made explicit in a note to Theodora from a fellow guest at the hotel, the General. It begins: "Madame, Physical geography is deceptive" (149). In the following discussion, the General asks Theodora if she believes in God, to which she replies, "I believe in this table" (152). The passage resembles one from *Riders in the Chariot*, in which Reha assures Himmelfarb that he will withstand the tortures of the Holocaust because his "eyes can see farther" (159). When she asks her husband what others can hold in their "minds to make the end bearable" (159), he replies: "This table … God is in this table" (159-160). In both novels, White implies that the divine or sacred may be perceived, with the appropriate amount of insight, in mundane aspects of everyday life. It is perhaps not so much "physical geography" that deceives, but the reluctance to grasp it outside standard modes of perception (*The Aunt's Story* 149). Whole worlds await revelation, if only White's characters possessed adequate vision.

The conclusions of White's novels, as Alan Lawson reminds us, typically offer readers "the terms that are appropriate for discussing them" (10). *The Aunt's Story* is no exception, and the final section "Holstius" contains significant thematic resolutions. While in "Jardin Exotique" Theodora learns to embrace the landscape of the mind, it is in "Holstius" that her perception becomes truly revelatory and empirical reality recedes. At the end of *The Aunt's Story* (1948) the "hypocrisies" of "man," which initially found symbolic expression in the ornamental houses and fences around the Goodman property, dissolve or fall away (20). The dissolution of these symbols parallels "the disintegrating world" of Theodora's mind (275):

> Theodora found the padlock that the owners had left, presumptuously protecting their house with a seal of iron. Another time she might have been deterred, but not now. It was obvious this must break. She had never been more confident. She picked at the screws of the hasp with her fingernails, and the screws came out easily, out of the old soft wood. The token padlock fell away from the house, so that she was able to walk in, into the smell of dust and animals. (274)

Padlock, ownership, presumption, and the seal of iron suggest indomitable forces, opposed to the ethereal, apparently crumbling, addle-minded figure of Theodora. Yet they fall away, as William Blake suggested false sensory perceptions would do, if the perceiver could but cut through to the "Eternal Now" ("Anno Lavater" 1369). Theodora's clarity of vision is soon made apparent: "She looked at the world with eyes blurred by water, but a world curiously pure, expectant, undistorted. She could almost have read a writing on the bark of any given tree" (279). Despite eyes that are blurring, Theodora has never seen more clearly.

The conclusion of *The Aunt's Story* depicts the release of White's first visionary protagonist from both the bonds of selfhood and society, achieving previously unimaginable insights that eluded White's early characters. In place of signifiers of quotidian control, Theodora now gauges the scenes around her in abstract metaphors: "A time of crumbling hills. A time of leaf, still, trembling, fallen" (275). For Alan Lawson, the fractured and liminal imagery of the conclusion reflects the novel's broader project of breaking down "culturally-specific Western assumptions" (14), including the "codes with which we have already structured our world and the interpretive narratives we use to explain it" (15). The stable orthodoxy of Western epistemology is replaced not only by disjuncture and rupture but also liberation. The assumption of "permanence," one of humanity's chief errors, is dismantled and the apparent dissolution of Theodora's mind becomes a deliverance.

The unexpected implications of White's fractured imagery are also tied to the natural world. Unlike the alienation or desire to escape that characterised the conclusions of *Happy Valley* and *The Living and the Dead* (1941), Holstius appears to Theodora as "detached' but there is no resulting sense of alienation—she is "not conscious of isolation" (276). She is at peace. This sense of accord corresponds with Theodora's increasing immersion in her natural surrounds. In the concluding pages of the novel, she "went amongst the trees" (278) and felt that "she could almost have read a writing on the bark of any given tree" (279). Immersion in nature is awarded to Theodora because she has decoded its gifts and messages. Holstius, too, is becoming part of the natural world: "She looked through the trees for the tree walking, which in time would become Holstius" (279). Signalling the integration of mind with benevolent nature, Theodora "smiled to herself as she anticipated the recognition of his kind eyes" (279).

Finally equipped with the perceptive powers required to access the full potential of the lands, *The Aunt's Story* concludes with Theodora Goodman connecting to and transcending its empirical boundaries. In this transfiguration, landscape as mere backdrop becomes a richer, imagined affiliation with place. Although at the end of the novel Theodora is taken to a psychiatric institution—"there are folks who'll make you comfortable," we are told—she remains entirely self-possessed in a way that neither of White's previous protagonists, Dr Halliday nor Elyot Standish, could manage (287). Moreover, this insightful and exultant form of self-possession becomes vital to White's later fiction and that of his inheritors, such as David Malouf. Whereas Dr Halliday is left feeling hopeless and Elyot Standish grasping towards meaning and connection, Theodora is resolute. Unbounded by civil codes or even the strictures of sanity, Theodora "trembled and glittered," as will later White protagonists. Like the rose perched atop her hat, Theodora's spirit is left "leading a life of its own" (287). The

possibility of connection with greater, intangible forces, repeatedly thwarted in *Happy Valley* (1939) and *The Living and the Dead* (1941), is finally realised.

From *Happy Valley* (1939) through to *The Aunt's Story* (1948), key developments in White's exploration of the Australian landscape and its inhabitants can be traced. These early works, later described by the author as his "rambling immature novels" (*Flaws in the Glass* 46), set the scene for the more ambitious fiction that dominated his corpus in the 1950s. Notwithstanding his early experiments in style and setting, these formative novels suggest that White suspected Australia bore a "pink clean place underneath" its sometimes unsightly surface, and offered the opportunity for new beginnings (*Happy Valley* 28). Similarly, the effects wrought by the great cultural changes that took place between 1939 and 1948 are evident in the growing centrality of landscapes of the mind, an increasingly pessimistic portrayal of Europe, and a return, in *The Aunt's Story* (1948), to an Australian setting. Hope is not placed in external, civilising forces that had failed, but in the individual.[34] A marked change is observable, however, in the way that White concludes these novels. While *Happy Valley* (1939) and *The Living and the Dead* (1941) survey the failures of civilisation and end on notes of isolation, exile, and despair, White's fiction from *The Aunt's Story* (1948) through to *Riders in the Chariot* (1961) concludes with promises of connection, belonging, and even redemption.

[34] This was a quintessential paradigm of Romantic literature, where the utopian hopes of writers, initially ignited by revolutionary France, soured as decades of war were unleashed and France became a rapacious empire under Napoleon, rather than a beacon of liberty. These issues are authoritatively addressed in Abrams' *Natural Supernaturalism* and Berlin's *The Roots of Romanticism*.

Chapter 2: Inverted Wastelands – The Desert and the Suburb in Patrick White's Fiction

Mention of Patrick White's desert landscapes might typically invoke images of stalwart explorers advancing across a vast inland wilderness, but his wastelands were more all-encompassing than this conventional frontier image suggests. In the span of four years, from the publication of *Voss* in 1957 through to *Riders in the Chariot* in 1961, White transformed the meaning of an Australian desert in his work. In tracing Leichhardt's journey from the Condamine River into the nation's northern interior in *Voss*, White revalorised the underrepresented terrains and spiritual possibilities of Australia's geographical desert.[35] There is arguably another desert, however, that White explored in equal measure—the desert of the human mind. For White, individual vision and innate capacity bring great insight. The troubling intellect can be a source of arrogance and unchallenged notions of Western progress, and its night-side is on display in the urban and suburban spaces of *Riders in the Chariot*. The sequence of these works seems far from coincidental. In these two novels, White continues the inversion of aesthetic orders and priorities observable in his prior work. Just as the author overturned the Old World/New World binary in his early fiction, here the binary of metropolitan centre versus vacant outback is upturned, transferring emptiness to urban spaces and restoring vitality to spaces that had been largely regarded as empty by settlers. Having infused the arid outback with a sense of possibility and growth, White found a suitable metaphoric location for the disconnection, emptiness, and suffering once symbolised by the desert in Australian urban centres. Yet even in the suburbs, vision and White's visionaries

[35] Prior to *Voss* (1957), colonial adventure writing, namely in the work of Ion Idriess, had already revealed the desert to the imagination of Australian readers. Commercially successful biographies like *The Cattle King* (1932) and *Flynn of the Inland* (1936) may not have had the literary standing of White but nevertheless contributed to circulating notions of central Australia in popular culture. White's novel contribution concerns his focus on the desert as a terrain of metaphysical quest and profound natural beauty, elevating the so-called outback to a serious object of aesthetic and spiritual enquiry.

cannot be altogether suppressed. These two parts, as we shall see, fit together as a single thesis in which White neither advocates strictly for the geographical desert nor its symbolic counterpart in the suburb but instead foregrounds perception as the key to a spiritual dominion. In White's emphasis on the link between individual perception or vision, spiritual dominion or imagination, and the natural world, his landscape legacy and its central motifs are cemented.

Re-Envisaging the Desert

Customarily, the Australian desert was seen by colonists as manifoldly infelicitous and lacking providential direction. In contrast, White's initial depictions of local landscapes held a sense of promise that had remained largely untapped until the publication of *Voss* in 1957. While the shortcomings of the settler-colonial experience had been previously attributed to the Australian environment, White's fiction cast responsibility back onto the perceptive powers of settler society and its inhabitants. The introduction of White's first visionary character in *The Aunt's Story* (1948) offered a solution to the sense of disconnection, even exile, which pervaded White's early novels: with requisite insight and sensitivity, the gifts heretofore buried in the land might be unearthed. Before turning to this vital discovery, however, I will first consider initial receptions of the desert and the role that *Voss* played in challenging received notions of an empty, Australian interior.

From the first recorded European descriptions of *Terra Australis* and well into British settlement, Australia was portrayed as a place of desolation and later as an arid land of exiles. Only very rarely was it considered as a potential Arcadia or utopian Antipodes.[36] In official terms, the wish that it should serve as a deterrent to criminals contended with a desire to attract free settlers to the land, which involved depicting its positive potential. Formerly

[36] Some utopian imaginings of the Antipodes include Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1627), and Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621).

unimproved nature slowly brought forth promising harvests and hidden riches. The open grasslands, well-suited to pastoral pursuits, became the subject of bush ballads and pioneer tales, and the wattle rose to the status of a national icon.[37] By federation, the coast and hinterlands just beyond had largely been conquered and made subservient to settler needs.

In contrast, the outback's empty immensity seemed an insurmountable challenge and attracted fervent reprobation from Australia's settler-invader forebears. Throughout the history of Australian settler literature, the desert was chiefly a place to which colonial authors sent their fictional settlers to die or, at the very least, to suffer hardship and heartbreak.[38] This tradition lived well into the twentieth century, from Henry Handel Richardson's description of "a dun-coloured desert" in *Australia Felix* (1917) through to Hoadley in *Holden's Performance* (1987) grasping its potential to assume whatever aspects a wily politician craved (*Australia Felix* 7).[39] Poets, striving for an embracing national vision, followed suit. In 1939 AD Hope's searing indictment of Australia described a landscape marred by "rivers of water" that "drown among inland sands" but culminated in an "Arabian desert of the human mind," foreshadowing White's developments. Similarly, in 1942 James McAuley wrote of a "salty sunken desert, /A futile heart" in "Envoi." Whether in prose or verse, Australia's arid inland overwhelmingly represented emptiness, death, and futility.

In the visual arts and sciences, however, small shifts in understanding began to appear. From the 1930s through to the 1950s, with the advent of air travel across the inland, increasing interest from the scientific community, and crucial innovations in the visual arts, changes began to take hold in the way that Australians perceived their arid interior. Sidney

[37] Published in *The Bulletin* in 1887, Henry Lawson's poem "A Song for the Republic" introduced the wattle as a national icon, especially for an independent Australia. In more recent times, Lawson's phrase "if blood should stain the wattle" has been appropriated to describe a relocated anxiety about Australia's violent colonial past and history of Indigenous oppression.
[38] Exceptions include the work of Ernest Favenc and later Ion Idriess. For both authors the desert was often the site of potential adventure, colonial expansion, and exceptional mineral wealth.
[39] *Australia Felix* is part I of *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*.

Nolan's paintings of the 1940s and 50s were of particular significance to White, influencing his vision of Australia's resplendent red centre.[40] During this period, distinctions also began to be made in scientific discourse between different kinds of outback and desert environments. From the great Shield, an area of molten rock stretching over half of Australia, to the undulating hills of linear dunefields and sand ridge habitats, and through to stony plains and scrub land, the outback and desert landscapes revealed a geodiversity to scientists that had rarely been seen or appreciated by settlers and their descendants. Yet despite the division of the outback into different ecological terrains, "the Centre and the North" remained "lumped together as 'empty', undeveloped or unproductive land" (Robin, *How a Continent Created a Nation* 101). For the most part, Australia remained resistant to accepting, much less understanding or celebrating, its deserts (103).

Since publication in 1957, *Voss* has been widely credited with raising the cultural status of the Australian desert. An early review of the novel in *The New York Times* described the way it captured the "true and original values" of Australians, which are "rooted in the outback, not the cities" (Grattan 4). While this had been true of the bush, the desert had been largely omitted from such nationalistic celebrations, as we have seen. Other early reviews similarly focused on the nation building role of the novel: "Mr White has endowed the Australian imagination with a symbolic figure of heroic proportions applying its whole strength to the task of learning to know Australia" (Aurousseau 87). In 1974, Dorothy Green responded to Aurousseau's essay by stressing that *Voss* was not simply about knowing Australia, but about knowing the self. She argued:

> The desert is to Australia what the sea once was to Britain or Greece: it represents the unknown, the mysterious. But because one can walk into the desert with comparative

[40] For Helen Verity Hewitt, this influence was so pronounced as to suggest White as "a literary correlative of the history of Australian modernist painting" (4).

> ease, it is, for adventurous men, a far more palpable presence, a greater temptation to explore than the sea. It represents less of a barrier between the fact and the mystery, between the "world of semblance" and the "world of dream." For White, this geographical feature takes on great psychological, metaphysical, erotic and political significance. (286)

Interpretations of the desert in *Voss* as a symbol of "psychological, metaphysical, erotic, and political significance" have varied over time, but its importance has endured. For example, in 1977 Richard Campbell extended a theological consideration of *Voss* into a broader philosophical approach in which the desert reflects a "deep, inarticulate sense of a limit" and operates as:

> the correlative of the recognition of the contingency of our "being-in-the-world." Practically, it means that we are driven back into our situation, to grapple with the recalcitrant nature of what is given – our so-called materialism and pragmatism. (188)

For many early critics, the idea that *Voss* brought the desert into conversation with not only the discovery of the nation but aspects of our own "being-in-the-world" was paramount.[41]

The role of *Voss* in introducing settlers to the possibilities of the desert has received continued attention in Australian literary scholarship into the twenty-first century. Roslynn Haynes (2013) and Bill Ashcroft (2014), for example, both suggest that the novel refigured a desolate terrain into a vibrant space of spiritual apotheosis and personal growth. Haynes argues that *Voss* "transformed the Australian desert into a dramatic arena for psychological struggle, spiritual quest and final revelation" (*Desert: Nature and Culture* 172). In "Horizons of Hope" (2014), Ashcroft similarly underscored the symbolic significance of the landscape in *Voss*, suggesting that the novel reoriented local perceptions of the desert towards a sublime, even sacred, space: "For Voss, Australia remains the vast abstraction of its landscape, the

[41] Although this expression is explained in Campbell's article, for clarity here: the phrase was coined by Martin Heidegger in *On Time and Being*, originally published as *Sein und Zeit* in 1927.

canvas for his story of failed self-deification, the horizonal sublime of early settlement and exploration" (30). Regardless of how White's reworking of the settler-colonial relationship to the desert is interpreted, there is no disputing that *Voss* broke ground.

Among this rich and ranging criticism, less has been made of the biodiversity of White's interior and its central, character-building function in *Voss*. There are three primary ways that White re-envisions the bleak and colourless desert and transfers this reimagining to his characters and, by extension, readers. First, White contrasts a sublime experience of the desert with an intricate, detailed, and diverse microcosm. Throughout *Voss*, the sublime functions as a psychological frontier that tests the limits of human (settler) will, but this experience often—and somewhat paradoxically—culminates in an increased focus on the microscopic, material aspects of the desert ecology. Secondly, while the desert is not the only landscape traversed in *Voss*, it is a primary element deployed in White's portrayal of individuals. White initiated a practice of characterisation in which elements of the surrounding environment are incorporated into character descriptions. Importantly, he predominantly uses the variance and detail of the desert environment, rather than its vast and sublime aspects, in this characterisation. Finally, these types of settler experiences, and the resultant sense of knowledge and belonging in the desert, are juxtaposed with the experiences and characterisation of Indigenous characters. White's ongoing critique of the abetting of reason and material progress under the aegis of Western civilisation will be factored into this contrast between settler and Indigenous characterisation. In terms of the desert itself, the mere existence of Indigenous communities in its midst contradicts stereotypical depictions of a lifeless, even life-denying, space. White's portrayal of Indigenous existence in the desert, despite being variously troubled, does suggest that the desert can be habitable and amenable, and that the problem has always been with settler vision, rather than the land itself.

From exploration through to settlement, the Australian desert was a place of immensities and the site of a sublime that was conceptually removed from England and Europe. In *Voss*, however, White changed not only the international perception of Australia but recast its conventions of beauty and the natural world. As the Nobel committee would say years later in Stockholm, White was responsible "for an epic and psychological narrative art which has introduced a new continent into literature" ("Nobel Prize in Literature 1973"). Most strikingly in *Voss*, White imagined the desert anew. Though devoid of seasonal change it proved, in his hands, an ideal setting for a different kind of sublime, an exploration of horizons and "silence, which is immeasurable, like distance, and the potentialities of the self" (*Voss* 13). Alongside the many practical challenges the desert posed to explorers and settlers, Australia's vast "emptiness" also represented a frontier that was philosophically problematic. Like Bachelard's forest, the Australian desert has been remarked upon for its "before-us" quality, suggesting that the richness of human encounters with the desert stems from the sense of contingency experienced within them: "emptiness is not nothing; it is the uncanny limit of our self-assertion, a beyond, an 'outback'" (Campbell 188). The unique "emptiness" of the desert, then, is the same quality that endows it with experiential richness.

The expanse of the desert, far from being a physical analogue of the "Great Australian Emptiness," becomes in White's hands magnificently enabling for the colonial explorer and settler ("The Prodigal Son" 15). Staged in opposition to luxury, pretension, and cold rationality from White's first novel *Happy Valley* (1939, 69) through to *Voss* (1957, 58), the desert also stands in opposition to the metaphysical and ontological vacuity that White often depicted in more populated areas. Thus, where urban dwellings can enclose, the silent depths of the desert "flower" (*Voss* 39). Even the "oases of affection" that "made the desert endurable"—for Voss, Laura's correspondence—must end to reveal its full potential. Though at times bare, White's desert is not nothing—it is the "fierce heat of unreason" that

"threatened to wither any such refuge" (*Voss* 298). That is, drawing on both the local environment and a biblical heritage, the power of White's desert has the capacity to weaken conventions, be they social or epistemological. Here the desert stands as a countervailing force to the rational realm. Applied to the desert, many of the inherited instruments of Western knowledge, like maps, compasses, and even received notions of traditional desert landscapes, fall short. The intellect and notions of Western advancement are dwarfed by the spectacle of the natural world and, for White, returned to their rightful place of cosmic insignificance.

In *Voss*, the experience of the sublime desert often directs characters towards ever-narrower loci of control. Self-reflection and introspection are accompanied by a gravitation towards the small, graspable, and material details of the earth. Within the charged unknown of the interior, each man in Voss's convoy inevitably turns inward but does so through different means. Le Mesurier turns to poetry, Voss to telepathic exchanges with his soulmate Laura, Judd to an earthly pragmatism, and Palfreyman to his faith. The arresting confrontation with the desert demands some surrender of human will—not merely to its vast sublimity, but to its corresponding promise in *Voss*, the hope of transcendence. Throughout White's novel, such transcendence is achieved, at least in part, by looking down—at the dirt itself—and becoming immersed in its variation and potential for wonder. As Willy Pringle suggests at the end of *Voss*: "The blowfly on its bed of offal is but a variation of the rainbow. Common forms are continually breaking into brilliant shapes. If we will explore them" (374). In focus, the cornucopia of life on the surface of the earth appears as majestic as the scope of the immense, horizontal sublime.[42]

Contrary to popular conceptions of the desert in the mid-twentieth century, which saw Australia's deserts as a hideous blank, the interior in Voss is a dynamic life force. This is

[42] For further reference to the horizontal sublime, see Ashcroft et al, *Intimate Horizons*, 2009.

evident first in Voss's journey, which stretches roughly from Botany Bay in New South Wales through to the Simpson and Sturt deserts in Queensland. As a carefully drafted map by Colin Roderick indicates, although White was guided by the journals and exploratory routes of Leichardt and Eyre, Voss took his own path through the interior (see Figure 3). In contrast to depictions of the outback as a monochromatic blank, Voss's journey covers several terrains, from urban Sydney, a wet subtropical coast, through subhumid plains, to outback and desert regions, moving across dry slopes, and into a temperate semi-arid and arid interior. The desert has many faces, and White insists his readers grasp Australia's natural diversity.

Figure 3. Hand-drawn map by Colin Roderick

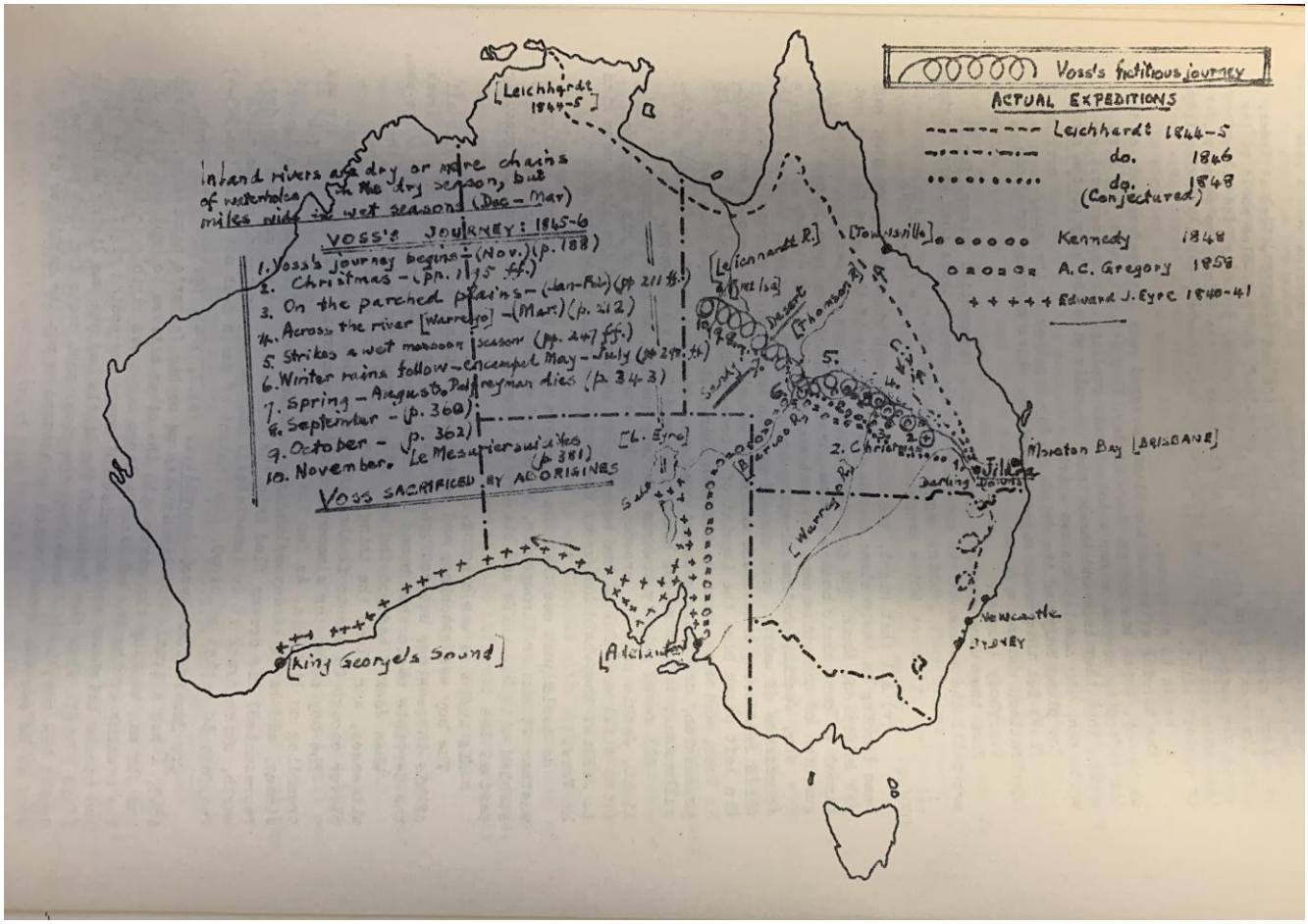

Figure 3. Roderick, Colin. "Lecture Notes." Ross Smith Room, Building 4, James Cook University, Bebegu Yumba Campus.

A dynamic place of rain, flowers, piercing heat, dry winds, and cold, dark nights, White's celebratory depiction of a manifold desert ecology is distinct from prominent

portrayals of the desert at the time. Despite drawing heavily on the Hebraic mythology of the wilderness, White's depiction emphasises the specificities of the Australian desert. By focusing on what distinguishes the antipodean interior from the biblical desert, White accentuates and celebrates the features, such as red rock, dust, and spinifex, that might enable Australians to fulfil Clarke's call "to comprehend why free Esau loved his heritage of desert sand better than all the bountiful richness of Egypt" ("Preface to Adam Lindsay Gordon's *Sea Spray and Smoke Drift*" 46). The pen that first challenged preconceptions of the land in *Happy Valley* is working overtime here.

In *Voss*, the perpetually dry, monochromatic settler terrain assumes various, life-affirming forms. From the sudden emergence of butterflies, "mobs of cockatoos" and "ever-protean light" (*Voss* 141), through to desert showers, rushing lakes, green brigalows, the red of rocks, and the blood of men, the desert in *Voss* "evinces a remarkably regenerative life-force" (Gibson 203). In Chapter 10, for example, Voss and his convoy of explorers experience a desert rain-shower, which is narrated with almost spiritual reverence: "Steam had begun to rise from the sodden earth" and the men appear as "small figures on the same mountain" (215). The regenerative power of desert rain becomes further apparent once it ends, when "an air of peace … drowned many doubts" (215). In other words, the rain not only produces greenery, but arguably spiritual shoots as well. The riverbed, previously dry, is also renewed, bearing "thick, turbulent yellow water" and "green, too, was growing in intensity, as the spears of grass massed distinctly in the foreground, and a great, indeterminate green mist rolled up out of the distance" (225). Defying conventional representations of the desert, the interior landscape is teeming with life and movement.

Key character transformations typically rely on such experiences, which are abounding in ecological detail, growth, and variety. In "Greening White" (2022), Graham Huggan recently observed White's related tendency to:

> effectively turn "external" things – places, landscapes, natural phenomena – into objective correlatives for the thoughts and feelings of his characters: symbolic representations of their own frequently murky and contradictory "interior" worlds. (23)

Most important, however, is the capacity of any given character to perceive such riches. Rejuvenation in the desert is accompanied by the narrator's appeal to multiple senses. Sight, sound, and scent combine to form an impression of harmony and possibility. "The gurgle of water" is heard alongside a "thousand pricking sounds of moist earth, the sound of cud in swollen cheeks of cattle, and sighs of ravaged horseflesh that looked at last fed and knowing" (215). The Australian desert becomes a palpable life-force, and even the air emanates a "good scent of rich, recent, greenish dung" (215). This biological diversity is emphasised when butterflies emerge from the earth: "Over all this scene, which was more a shimmer than the architecture of landscape, palpitated extraordinary butterflies. Nothing had been seen yet to compare with their colours, opening and closing" (215). Instead of merely rugged, harsh landscapes, the author finds delicate creatures and multi- instead of monochrome plains, while the notion of their wings palpating subtly evokes ideas of transfiguration and metamorphosis. "Dream" and "semblance," or ideal and appearance, merge in an image of bountiful restoration (215), mirroring White's broader conjoining of the material and transcendent (215).[43]

Certainly, interaction with the sublime can lead to transformative personal experiences. For White, and many of his literary predecessors, the sublime offered the opportunity to expand former limits of the self. As Edward Young's famous invocation of the sublime in "Night-Thoughts" suggests:

[43] In this respect, much of the imagery in *Voss* might be said to mirror the "limbic, the primordial, the mnemonic – the most exacting and most difficult to devise language for" and in this regard, arguably heralded contemporary ecopoetics, which is marked by "the senses (and the struggle to bring them to language)" (John Ryan 2).

> How Glorious, then, appears the Mind of Man,
> When in it All the Stars, and Planets, roll?
> And what it seems, it is: Great Objects make
> Great Minds, enlarging as their Views enlarge;
> Those still more Godlike, as These more Divine. ("Night IX," 284)

In Young's account of human experience, the "mind of man" is related to a divine universe. Just as this universe suggests a beatific correlative in its ability to capture such great and varied mysteries as "All the Stars, and Planets," the mind suggests something equally powerful in its capacity to envision it. The translation of whole worlds into thoughts, or figments of imagination, is no small feat. For Young, as the significance of what a mind contemplates grows so too does the mind. An encounter with "great objects," such as the sublime horizon of the desert landscape, compels expansion because its mere size introduces the question of human insignificance in a celestial realm, thereby "enlarging" consciousness and forging "great minds." But for White, the Australian desert offered even more than this impressive experience.

The most powerful constitutive force in White's desert arguably rests in micro- rather than macroscopic phenomena. In "The Prodigal Son" (1958) White declared his admittedly naïve and problematic aim—given that the land had already been inhabited by its Traditional Owners for millennia—to "people a barely inhabited country"; but at the same time, he also brought material elements of the country—its dirt, stones, and desert rains—into the people (17). That is, settler and migrant characters achieve a connection to the land not merely by suffering in it, or by expanding their consciousness, but by being rebuilt in its image. The use of microscopic details both to form and describe characters in *Voss* (1957) occurs in two ways: a visceral, often painful encounter with the desert and the use of environmental adjectives to describe characters.

Throughout the novel, close physical interaction with the natural world is routinely connected to spiritual progress. While transcendence and metaphysical experience are often end points or goals, earthly matter is integral to their attainment. This is evident when Judd is described as "wedded to earthly things," with a soul that "had achieved fulfilment not by escaping from his body, but by returning to it" (202). Bridget Grogan suggests that Judd's characterisation is marked by "an innocence of humility reflected in material objects and the natural world, both free of the egoism of human consciousness, a narcissism that White associates with Enlightenment humanism" ("Resuscitating the Body: Corporeality in the Fiction of Patrick White" 6). As Grogan observes throughout her scholarship on White, rather than simply foregrounding the "humility" of the empirical world ("Resuscitating the Body" 6), White's description of Judd indicates that matter is central to metaphysical experience. Corresponding themes, focusing on revelations gleaned from prosaic matter, have been noted previously in White's fiction, be it in the infamous "gob of spittle" (478) from *The Tree of Man* (1955), or in broader terms of abjection (Grogan 2012) or mud and malleability (Clements 2009). Consistently, White's oeuvre suggests that "God," however amorphous the author's notion of it might be, is not "out there" in some indistinct ether, but here on earth, amid the inert, even uncivilised, dirt. As Clements argues: "White repeatedly suggests that God is found not in churches, but by grubbing in muckheaps" (133). Similarly, the majesty of White's desert can be said to rest not merely on its metaphoric potential or sublime horizon—though beauty and possibility are undoubtedly found here—but on the ground, amid the teeming mass of life on the land itself.

The reconstitution of characters through a visceral engagement with the surrounding environment is typified by White's portrayal of Judd. He is persistently characterised as "intensely interested in natural forms" (201). "For instance," the narrator offers:

> he would pick at the black fruit of trees to release the seed; with the rough skin of his hand he would rub a hot, white bone ... as if to recreate the flesh. He would trace with the toe of his boot and footprint in the dust to learn its shape and mission. (201)

By learning the "shape and mission" of the environment and harnessing its creative power, be it as a released seed or by material encounters with the natural world through his own flesh, Judd's immersion in the natural world is emphasised, as is "one of the novel's most insistent images – that of flesh as vegetation, vegetation as flesh" (Kiernan 61). Judd is the only settler character to begin the expedition with this knowledge and the only member of the exploring party alive at its conclusion. Perhaps Judd is the only explorer to survive the desert because as a former convict with intimate knowledge of suffering and the need to "re-create the flesh" through interaction with the land, Judd proves to be a seminal figure not only for White but for those who will write after him (201).

While many of White's settler characters are rebuilt by the constituent parts of the desert, they must often suffer—even die—in the land before achieving an enduring connection to it. In this regard, belonging must still be earned in the landscape. Only through suffering and ultimately death, for example, do Voss, Le Mesurier and Palfreyman overcome the exigencies imposed on them by their environment. When Palfreyman is killed by an Indigenous man, he is promptly interred in the earth by Voss and his men, and "nothing remained of the expedition except a cairn of stones that marked the grave" (290). Like Palfreyman, Voss's death results in metaphorical and material immersion in the land: "His dreams fled into the air, his blood ran out dry upon the dry earth, which drank it up immediately" (329). In the context of the novel's conclusion, in which Voss remains in and of the countryside, the incorporation of the "dry earth" of the desert into the moment of death suggests that he is not so much sacrificed to the Australian interior as rebuilt in its image.

In this reconstituting of characters, adjectives play a key and instructive part. They vary, for instance, in accordance with the changing countryside. Judd is initially portrayed as:

> a union of strength and delicacy, like some gnarled trees that have been tortured and twisted by time and weather into exaggerated shapes, but of which the leaves still quiver at each change, and constantly shed shy, subtle scents. (108)

That is, near Jildra, northwest of Brisbane and a subtropical region, Judd is a "gnarled tree" with delicate "leaves" and "subtle scents." But as the explorers travel further into the interior, Judd is described as a "stone man," only vulnerable in the company of those who have borne witness to his suffering, where he might "crack open and disclose all manner of unexpected ores, even a whole human being" (160). As White's language insists, dynamic, changing physical and human realms interact profoundly. Landscapes shift and characters develop as White moves towards a notion of human wholeness constituted by tangible aspects of the earthly realm.

Adjectives vary not only according to shifting environments but also to specific beholders and situations. Perception, as always in White, is crucial. Stones, for example, feature prominently in the description of settler characters and offer an impression of the Australian desert as distinct from popular conceptions of a vast and sandy frontier. Their use, however, changes significantly depending on perspective and context. Judd and Voss, for example, are both described as stone men, but the meaning of this assignment changes throughout the novel. Judd as a "stone man" connotes resoluteness and impenetrability, at least from the viewpoint of his fellow explorers, but from the narrator's frame of reference it suggests the extent to which he actualises the stony environment around him and its innate humility (160). Voss's desert-nature is similarly variable. From the narrator's perspective, Voss is "a crag of a man" (62), but this stony characterisation develops as the novel progresses, and his disposition soon reflects "the nature of a second monolith, of more friable

stone, of nervous splinters, and dark mineral deposits" (110). Given that a monolith is a single, solid stone formation, typically made of hard igneous or metamorphic rock, Voss assumes here something more than complexity. The resolute, stubborn "crag of a man" (62) is revealed to have an unexpectedly vulnerable core, made of "more friable stone" and "nervous splinters" (110) that their odyssey will certainly expose.

From the perspective of Laura, too, Voss's stoniness and desert-nature undergoes multiple transformations. In some instances, his stoniness represents an impenetrable and repellent disposition, but elsewhere it deepens her love. Laura is initially repulsed by his hard façade, declaring that she "would not want marriage with stone," but her position shifts as she unearths some of Voss's complexities (52). Although at first Laura maintains her initial rejection of Voss, her attitude quickly evolves to reflect his multivalences. As her perception changes, so too does the way Voss is characterised in terms of the surrounding environment:

> You are so vast and ugly, like some desert, with rocks, rocks of prejudice, and, yes, even hatred. You are so isolated. That is why you are fascinated by the prospect of desert places, in which you will find your own situation taken for granted, or more than that, exalted. (69)

Evaluation is shifting, its components evolving as perception penetrates landscapes and the internal desert places of character. A mere paragraph later, when Voss asks Laura if she hates him, her position and use of the desert as a metaphor are inverted: "I am fascinated by you … You are my desert!" (69). Laura's expression here suggests that White's desert is emotionally as well as ecologically nuanced, connoting isolation but also love and attachment. To Laura, Voss is both "vast and ugly" like the desert, but also intriguing, multifaceted, and loved for this same desert-nature. In many ways, Laura's turn from repelled to enamoured by his "desert places" parallels the experience of the reader, discovering the desert anew (69). Through Laura, White conveys the complexity of the desert, suggesting its clear hindrances

but also subtle possibilities and worthwhile depths—discoveries dependent as always on the perspective of the beholder.

While the author is clearly unsympathetic to the privileging of narrow rationalism or a purely material and commercial take on reality without requisite imagination, it remains a dominant feature in minor characters and their attitudes to the land. Throughout *Voss*, a binary is routinely drawn between cartographic and textual modes of understanding the land and experiential and sensory systems. As Lynn McCredden suggests in "Splintering and Coalescing: Language and the Sacred in Patrick White" (2014): "White portrays the fundamental dismantling of the white explorer's belief that he possesses the power to logically define, circumscribe and understand a place and a culture he does not know" (225). While this is unquestionably true of many characters in *Voss*, dissolution of this belief is limited in its scope, rather than true or applicable to settler society generally. This is exemplified by an early exchange between Voss and Mr Bonner:

> Mr. Bonner read the words, but Voss saw the rivers. He followed them in their fretful course. He flowed in cold glass, or dried up in little yellow pot-holes, festering with green scum. (15)

Mr Bonner is a "materialist" merchant (127) and he recites place names from the map as a kind of invocation and incantation: "to chant almost" (15).[44] In contrast, Voss does not "read the words" or deploy his intellect in approaching the land but comes to see "the rivers" in an embodied way. The shift from seeing the rivers to having "flowed" in them indicates a growing immersion in the land, physically and imaginatively. Voss acquires belonging, but only because he comes to "feel the shape of the earth" and in a sense (37), holds the real map of the country internally, or in "the country of the mind" (373). In contrast, Mr Bonner merely

[44] Mr Bonner, as a drapery merchant, is a literal purveyor of material.

"read the words" and remains fundamentally disconnected from the land and estranged from its interior (15).

A further point of comparison is provided by Indigenous characters in *Voss* (1957). In this respect, two key ideas are underlined by the author. The first concerns the distinction between broad Western approaches to the land, which favour reason and cartography, and experiential systems that are sometimes associated with an Indigenous understanding of the land.[45] Secondly, unlike White's settlers and explorers, Indigenous characters are described, though not re-made, in terms of the surrounding environment. Unfortunately, however, differences in settler and Indigenous understandings of the land are often reduced to stale tropes, and there is little subtlety in White's evocation of an Indigenous proximity to the natural world. Contrasts tend to be absolute and clear cut, as we shall see. In short, White was ill-equipped to depict Indigenous characters, much less include Indigenous culture in his critique of Western civilisation—not least because he had never met an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person when he wrote the novel.[46] In terms of his oeuvre, however, and its developing depictions of the natural world, what can usefully be taken from *Voss* is not merely White's advocacy for an Indigenous epistemology, or indeed his misappropriation of

[45] The assumption underlying White's binary—that he can see beyond Western enculturation—is explored further in Chapters Three and Four.

[46] Physical and social barriers probably contributed to White's limited interaction with Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people or communities. At Walgett, for example, settlers and Indigenous people were physically separated. In *Patrick White: A Life* (1991), David Marr describes these divisions in White's life, as well as revealing endemic problems in settler attitudes to First Nations people: "White did not meet an Aborigine [sic], they were everywhere but did not cross his path. Clem, alone of his neighbours, didn't take a black boy on the back of his sulky to open gates" (108). While White lived in a comfortable estate in town, local Aboriginal people lived in "humpies along the river bed" and were refused entry to local public buildings (108). When White wrote *Voss* (1957), WEH Stanner's Boyer lectures *After the Dreaming: Black and White Australians – an Anthropologist's View* (1968), in which he coined the phrase "The Great Australian Silence," were eleven years away, and still preceded the repeal of the White Australia policy (1973). White undoubtedly supported Aboriginal land rights, including formal treaty negotiations, to which he "sent something for the Aborigines" in 1979 (Marr, *Patrick White: Letters* 522). Nonetheless, White's rendering of historical events in *A Fringe of Leaves* (1976) was not factual because he regarded "historical reconstructions" as "too limiting" (467). In a letter to Geoffrey Dutton, White outlines his decision to foreground "states of mind," rather than any real history of settler-Indigenous relations (245). White was driven to create a "novel of psychological interest" and did not "consider it necessary to tell readers anything of this"—in this way, the depiction of Indigenous people as animalistic savages belonged to White, not history (467).

it, but a recognition of the potential value in different approaches to the land, be they taxonomical or perceptual. Finally, given that the desert's riches are not merely there for the taking but must be discerned, White's Indigenous characters are considered privileged by the author, as such discernment is presented as second nature to them. Whereas the explorers often need to suffer or die in the land before becoming connected to it, Indigenous characters are commonly described as already extensions of the earth and organically connected to it.

This distinction is apparent in the contrast between Indigenous journeying and the cartographic navigation of the land by the explorers. Despite early signs that Voss has reached a deeper understanding of the land, for most of the novel he still defers to Western exploratory or cartographic aids, such as a compass, gun, or horse, and struggles against the desert frontier. While "a party of blacks" appear to the explorers as "trooping gaily over the grey earth," over the same land Voss's contingent (173)

> were riding eternally over the humped and hateful earth, which the sun had seared until the spent and crumbly stuff was become highly treacherous. It was, indeed, the bare crust of the earth. Several of the sheep determined to lie down upon it and die. (173)

Every feature opposes their passage. Adjectives like "hateful," "seared," and "treacherous," pinpoint explorer responses and inherited attitudes, the death of the sheep suggests an innate hostility or dissonance between the land and its imported subjects. For all his vision and appreciation of the landscape, an unbridgeable gap remains between Voss, his explorers, and the desert for most of the novel.

Like the settler and explorer characters of *Voss*, White's Indigenous characters are described in terms of a diverse desert ecology. There are two main Indigenous characters in the novel, the elder Dugald and the young tracker Jackie, and both demonstrate a seemingly innate connection to the land. Such depictions often reveal White's inherited preconceptions

as much as his insights. In fairness, White attempted to recognise Indigenous perception in his fiction, and there was a comparative paucity of information available to him at the time of writing. Margaret Mead was adulated as a key anthropological touchstone and Henry Reynolds' breakthrough research in *The Other Side of the Frontier* (1981) was still decades away.[47] White was an inheritor of storied white prejudices and epistemologies and undoubtedly reproduced them in his fiction. This is by no means an excuse and only partially an explanation. Throughout the novel, for instance, there is a tension between his attempt to embrace an Australian ecopoetics that demonstrates a "commitment to ecoregionalism" and the "study of Indigenous environmental knowledges" and references to the well-worn trope of the noble savage (Ryan, "Australian Ecopoetics Past, Present, Future: What Do the Plants Say?" 1). White's likening of Indigenous characters to elements of nature has been rightly criticized for deferring to this trope.[48] Consider, for example, the description of the young Indigenous man, Jackie, as being "brought to animal life" in an exchange with Voss, as though exposure to settlers constituted a vivifying, life-affirming exchange for this mere creature (139). Elsewhere the characterisation of Jackie is similarly animalistic: "This one, Jackie, was really quite young. He stood about with the delicacy of a young girl, looking away while absorbing all details, listening with his skin, and quivering his reactions" (139). By referring to Jackie as "this one" and emphasising his youth, "delicacy," and animalistic "quivering," the passage reinforces the colonial history of "fetishizing" the "Black body" (Ryan, "This Black Body is Not Yours for the Taking" 121). The passage captures the tension between White's attempt to advance intercultural understanding and respect, by highlighting Jackie's connection to the natural world, with an inherited bias that makes the passage read—

[47] Mead made significant contributions to cultural anthropology, including her first work *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928). She was later awarded a Presidential Medal of Freedom (1979) posthumously. The citation commended Mead's work in advancing cultural anthropology as well as popularising the notion "that varying cultural patterns express an underlying human unity" (Peters and Woolley "Presidential Medal").
[48] For examples of this critique please refer to "White's Tribe" and "Tracking Our Country in Settler Literature" by Jeanine Leane and *Patrick White* by Simon During.

at least to a contemporary audience and no doubt others—like an atavistic sexualisation of an Indigenous child.

Yet, in White's description of Jackie he is also clearly at pains to emphasise nonvisual perception and a youthful purity that makes an exchange between an individual and a similarly untouched landscape possible. Set apart from settlers, Jackie is attuned to the natural world, listening not merely with his ears but his skin. Jackie's characterisation suggests a continuation of White's equation of skin with the land in his first novel *Happy Valley* (1939). Repeated epidermal imagery continues to suggest both a sensory understanding of the environment and the environment itself as a sensory organ, coterminous with those who listen to it. In this regard, White's portrayal of Jackie recalls the characterisation of many of his settler characters, including Miss Hare. Although the similarities between these two characters will be addressed at greater length in the next section on the suburb, for now it is notable that despite their similarities, Hare is drawn in far greater detail than Jackie.

Indeed, the primary difference between White's use of the desert environment to construct settler and Indigenous characters is the extent to which the inner lives of each are considered. Despite the author's repeated suggestion, in *Voss* and elsewhere, that settler society is limited by its colonial ties, White's Indigenous characters are consistently depicted through an imperial gaze. Jackie, for example, is described as "the native boy … always killing things, or scenting a waterhole, or seeing smoke in the distance, or just shambling off on his horse and standing on the fringes of liberty" (200). In this respect, he is alert and attuned to the environment, but his humanity is reduced to an avatar of the noble savage. While the inner lives of settlers and migrants in *Voss* are meditated upon extensively, this level of consideration and complexity is absent in White's Indigenous characters.

Throughout *Voss*, the author arguably appropriates Indigenous characters, and a perceived Indigenous epistemology, as part of servicing his broader claims—namely, that

Western civilisation overemphasises rationality and progress at the expense of perception and compassion. As Simon During concedes, for White, "'being human' is not a value in itself; when all is said and done, white 'civilisation' is empty, inauthentic" (During 31). White's question, here and later in *A Fringe of Leaves* (1976), centres on asking "whether the Indigenous people, living in close harmony with the earth and nature, are not more civilised than the colonial society" to which his protagonists belong (Chand 217). In doing so, however, White also "seems to Orientalise Aborigines by conflating their human identity with nature and suggesting that they belong more to nature than to humanity" (Mehta 243). While the author's description of Jackie as "animal," for example, may be meant in the same spirit that he portrays some of his later settler characters as fundamentally connected to earthly matter, in terms of Indigenous characterisation the adjective is roundly demeaning (139). While this method of connecting to the natural world might be considered, however imprecisely, an Indigenous epistemology, insofar as it represents knowledge acquired by "living in close harmony with the earth and nature," it is unequivocally White's epistemology and a white epistemology (Chand 217).

White advances three central changes to popular conceptions of the Australian desert in *Voss*. First, in the once maligned desert, White has found a place of immense imaginative richness, serving as both a metaphor for the human condition and as a place of unexpected aesthetic beauty, as well as a place of trial. Secondly, the settler is rebuilt in an image of the natural world through characterisation that relies on the desert experience, including its material aspects, to build and describe protagonists. This is an important step in building a relationship between White's characters and the surrounding natural environment. Finally, the desert brings black and white characters together in complex configurations that have the potential both to challenge entrenched attitudes and reinforce others. While White's settler characters invariably struggle to reconcile with the local terrain, Indigenous bonds with and

knowledge of the countryside are considered innate. This implicit challenge to Western civilisation and its privileging of reason and material progress by presuming to understand an Indigenous epistemology was troubling and not particularly effective, as commentary has noted.[49] White's critique is far more innovative when drawn in relation to his settler characters. But for now, with possibility and diversity firmly established in the desert, White's next novel *Riders in the Chariot* (1961) suggests where the true spiritual wastelands of Australia might be located.

The Great Australian Emptiness: The Suburb and the Desert of the Human Mind

With the local desert radically reconceptualised, White turned in his next novel, *Riders in the Chariot* (1961), to Australian urban spaces. This pairing of course recalls such traditional binaries as city and country, or Sydney and the bush, but is further particularised and, in White's hands, problematised through the stock identification of life in Australia with exile and desolation. Why, Marcus Clarke had asked, was Australian scenery marked by "weird melancholy," "desolation," and "sufferings" ("Preface to Adam Lindsay Gordon's *Sea Spray and Smoke Drift*" 45)? In *Voss* (1957), White had regenerated this alienating land, making it also a place of arresting beauty and manifold natural forms. Had exile and desolation thereby been deprived locally of an imaginative terrain? Yes and no. White's desert could still isolate and destroy overreaching explorers, but more importantly many of the colonial psychological

[49] Simon During, for example, suggests that "White fictionalised contemporary Aboriginal life away" (100) and Jeanine Leane convincingly argues that despite White's attempts to challenge, through Ellen, "the assumptions on which her notions of what is civilised and savage are based" (263), overwhelmingly his "representations of 'the tribe' do not, in fact, disturb or disrupt familiar images of and discourses on the Aborigine as the 'Other' in the Australian settler imagination" (258). This reading of White is by no means universal. Cynthia vanden Driesen, for instance, has described Ellen Roxburgh as emblematising "the possibility of a white indigeneity (xxvi)" and Chand suggests that White ultimately "recasts the original myth of captive English woman tormented by savages to rebirth her as a woman whose emotional and spiritual growth" facilitates a unique settler belonging (Chand 217). In "The Spirit of the Creative Word in Patrick White's *Voss*," Antonella Riem similarly underscores "the power of the creative, analogical, mythical and archetypal word of the Aboriginal guides Dugald and Jackie in Patrick White's *Voss* (1981) to show how they give voice to a partnership cultural paradigm" (223).

burdens and constraints were relocated in the new fictional milieux of Sarsaparilla and Barranugli portrayed in *Riders in the Chariot* (1961). The sequence of White's novels, then, is far from coincidental. The worlds portrayed in *Voss* (1957) and *Riders in the Chariot* (1961) are complementary realms that reflect on the desert both as geographical location and as a state of mind and, more broadly, on what it might take to create a so-called "race" with more complete "understanding" ("The Prodigal Son" 17).

The intricacies of these environments facilitate diverse opportunities and challenges. Against the backdrop of a sublime horizon, the desert landscape provides an ideal stage for testing and expanding the human spirit beyond quotidian constraints. Less expected from a writer criticised for his elitist anti-suburban stance, *Riders in the Chariot* suggests that urban and suburban areas also afford opportunities for interpersonal connection and spiritual growth. After all, its narrative turns on the communion of four disparate riders in suburbia, joined only by their numinous vision of Ezekiel's chariot. That is, the bland, monotonous suburb usually meets basic human needs, but in special circumstances it is also the site of unique visions and encounters. Nevertheless, in its own way the suburb can be as perilous as White's desert, whether through mental deadening, baneful stereotyping, or hateful violence. For White, it is individuals and their capacity for vision, rather than the appearance or conditions of a particular environment, which are required for profound transformation.[50]

Commentary on the two fictional poles of the desert and suburb in White's fiction has undergone important shifts of emphasis, but rarely are they seen as a mutually illuminating binary. While the initial reception of *Voss* (1957) approached the desert as a haunting but ultimately elevating terrain, early reviews of *Riders in the Chariot* (1961) framed the suburb as evincing the "shabby mediocrity and cowardly mistrust that prevail" in the suburbs and

[50] There is a precedent in White's work for this conflation of actual deserts with barren bureaucratic or social structures. In his essay "The Nobel Prize," White describes his time in the war as moving between two equally desolate landscapes: the deserts of the Middle East and "that other desert" of procedural "headquarters" (42).

"ordinary Australian life" (Aurousseau 31). Only in relatively recent times have scholars acknowledged the complexity of suburbia in White's fiction. From Andrew McCann (1998) through to Nathanael O'Reilly (2012) and Brigid Rooney (2018), the critical literature has begun to question the veracity of the idea that White simply "hated the suburbs" (During 16). For example, in *Suburban Space, the Novel and Australian Modernity* (2018), Rooney suggests that White's approach is involved and at times contradictory, but that "it is precisely within suburbia that White discovers moments of illumination. His illuminati, touched by the burning fire of the real, live in suburbia" (64). In *Exploring Suburbia: The Suburbs in the Contemporary Australian Novel*, Nathanael O'Reilly likewise argues that White's position on the suburb is ambivalent, suggesting the perils of suburbia alongside its potentialities. Despite White being "labeled 'anti-suburban'" and *Riders in the Chariot* (1961) "considered evidence of White's alleged disdain for suburbia and its inhabitants" (1), in White's suburbs "experimentation, insight and discovery are both a possibility and a reality" (8). While the Australian suburb generally deserves closer consideration in White's fiction, its connection to the desert and the sequential relationship of *Voss* and *Riders in the Chariot* have been largely overlooked in critical literature. As such, the following discussion of *Riders in the Chariot* will focus on White's developing notion of the desert as a state of mind, rather than a geographic location.

Australian settler identity is historically tied to the kindred bond between settlers and a new land. Overwhelmingly, this connection has been conceived in relation to natural environments. In this respect, white Australian responses to land threw up a paradox—the vast majority choose to live in urban settings, yet the outback or bush landscape has long been regarded as the most "authentic location for the distinctive Australian experience" (Turner 26). As Donald Horne memorably claimed in *The Lucky Country* (1964), there is a case to be made for Australia as "the first suburban nation" (29). Despite their overwhelming popularity

as a residential locale, the suburbs themselves were often sidelined in the national imaginary. This shifted after World War II when the fictionalisation of urban and suburban dwellings grew, but even then such depictions were often satirical. From the famous indictment of the Australian suburb in George Johnston's *My Brother Jack* (1964) through to the provincial caricatures of Barry Humphries, the suburb in Australian post-war fiction—and much post-war fiction internationally—has been synonymous with conformity and mediocrity.

These scattered critiques may be brought together in the concept of the Great Australian Ugliness, a trope set forth in Robin Boyd's *Australian Ugliness* (1960). The particularities of Boyd's criticism deserve attention. They centre on a critique of Australian architecture, its penchant for a kitsch "Featurism," and the more serious moral and ideological foundations of these habits of design. Aligning a "country of many colourful, patterned, plastic veneers, of brick veneer-villas," with the destruction of the natural world and "the White Australia policy," Boyd concludes (9):

> The Australian ugliness begins with fear of reality, denial of the need for the everyday environment to reflect the heart of the human problem, satisfaction with veneer and cosmetic effects. It ends in betrayal of the element of love and a chill near the root of national self-respect. (51)

White's suburban novels often recall Boyd's critique, particularly regarding the status quo and its "fear of reality," the disjuncture between suburbia and the natural world, and the disavowal of the "heart of the human problem." As a writer, however, White foregrounds the human failings that underlie this architectural "ugliness" and, more profoundly, what leaps of imagination might be required for their resolution. In this regard, the author sought to transcend conventional understandings and stereotypical representations of urban and suburban Australia to discover, if you will, specks of gold amid the dross. White's suburb is not all deadening, nor is it uniform.

Whereas Robin Boyd's conception of the "heart of the human problem" remains a vague and unclarified phrase, in *Riders in the Chariot* it is a pressing concern of the author and one that directly impacts his presentation of characters and settings (51). From the opening page of his novel, White locates "the heart of the human problem" in the idea that although "the war was over, peace had not yet set hard" (*Riders in the Chariot* 7). White's first exposition of landscape suggests the nature of this larger war:

> An early pearliness of light, a lamb's-wool of morning promised the millennium, yet, between the road and the shed in which the Godbolds lived, the burnt-out blackberry bushes, lolling and waiting in rusty coils, suggested that the enemy might not have withdrawn. (7)

The introduction of eschatological imagery evokes a more all-encompassing battle even than a world war. This is the struggle between good and evil and between the natural world and its human-made incursions. In this regard, before the end of page one White has established the fundamental questions that guide the novel: what powers—human or otherwise—fall on the side of good and what forces constitute its dark underside? And, by extension, how might White's treatment of two very different suburban landscapes—Xanadu and the Brighta Bicycle Lamps factory—factor into this cosmic struggle? Much appears lacking in White's suburb and both the desert and more urban terrains offer impressions of "the heart of the human problem" in different guises, be it as a lack of humility, disregard for the natural world, or a destructive focus on mass-production and uniformity (Boyd 51). But even amid a monochrome installation of cheap, suburban homes, the natural world is cast, in the end, as quietly triumphant. Nevertheless, to really address "the heart of the human problem," such subtle perseverance requires a human contribution, which is the possession of a visionary capacity (Boyd 51).

Far from being a clichéd depiction of a dreary suburban sprawl, White creates an innovative portrait of the Australian suburb in three primary ways as he extends his reimagining of Australian wastelands. Firstly, the use of divergent locations, such as Xanadu and the Brighta Bicycle Lamps factory, suggests complex possibilities, as does the contrast of brutal concrete façades, industry, and the compartmentalisation of labour. Secondly, as in *Voss*, the surrounding environment is incorporated into individual descriptions, although this time its details are largely suburban. Similarly, different characters resonate with different aspects of the local landscape, and sometimes assume multiple forms in relation to varying contexts and beholders. Finally, this approach to characterisation will be considered in terms of White's disdain for the privileging of narrow rationality over imagination and how this position factors into his treatment of Indigenous characters. Overall, the causes of spiritual and moral desolation are located neither in the suburb nor the desert, but with humankind itself. Taken in succession, *Voss* and *Riders in the Chariot* suggest that all landscapes, be they man-made or wild, belong in the end to "the country of the mind" (*Voss* 373).

What counts then are individual responses and White provides a diverse and revelatory cast in *Riders in the Chariot*. Like the desert, there are also oppressive forces in the suburbs, but space still exists for individuals to expand their personal, spiritual, and cultural horizons. Here good and evil will continue their ceaseless struggle, as the opening pages suggest. Though a fostering ground for ignorance and bigotry, the suburb also offers opportunities for community and connection, providing a home to four uniquely gifted and socially divergent characters with a shared vision of Ezekiel's chariot. This select group includes an heiress and spinster more at home with animals than people, an Indigenous artist formerly abused in foster care, an Auschwitz survivor and Jewish intellectual, and an impoverished Christian woman whose innate and indefatigable goodness distinguishes her from the rest of humanity. They constitute what David Malouf has termed the "choric voices

of Sarsaparilla" (*Riders* viii). There is no doubt that White's riders defy the urban conventions of middle Australia, but their lives—and most exultant experiences—are nevertheless rooted in the suburbs and a cause for hope and renewed possibility there.

In contrast to stereotypical portrayals of the suburb, the Xanadu estate of *Riders in the Chariot* is wild, unique, and majestic. Inspired by the "Xanadu" of Coleridge's poem "Kubla Khan," subtitled "Or, a vision in a dream. A Fragment," Norbert Hare's mansion is built as a testament to a Romantic ideal. Like Norbert's quixotic shrine to the "brilliant," "elegant," and extraordinary (23), in Coleridge's original imagining there is not a strip of "colourful, patterned, plastic veneers" (Boyd 9) in sight. The poem begins:

> In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
> A stately pleasure-dome decree:
> Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
> Through caverns measureless to man
> Down to a sunless sea. (256)

From its outset, "Kubla Khan" underscores the centrality of vision, the virtues of the natural world, and the limitations of man—ideas central to both *Riders in the Chariot* and White's legacy. As an aspirational project of imagination, Norbert's Xanadu strives towards something of the "sacred" and "measureless to man," but ultimately falls short. His "grandest gesture" is, in the end, a "folly" (17). Rather than capturing anything of the "sacred" or "measureless," Norbert's estate arguably functions first as property, reflective of landscape as a commercial and social currency. As such, he preoccupies himself not with its spiritual or metaphysical possibilities, but with empty, self-aggrandising feats of memory, erudition, and material wealth. Norbert secures audiences of "lady guests" and attempts to dazzle them with "appropriate verses," or by highlighting the "freshly-laid foundations of porous yellow stone" (17) that line his majestic property. Although intended as a monument that might attest to a

world beyond utility and the merely quantifiable, under Norbert's directives the Xanadu estate comes to reflect a hollow and continuing pledge to materialism and individual ego.

While there is a great deal about Norbert and his palatial project of imagination that indicates limited insight, this blindness is complicated by competing signs of a significant visionary capacity. Like his daughter, Norbert possesses intuitive and perceptive abilities, sharing a glimpse of the "riders in the Chariot" early in the novel with a young Miss Hare (29). Norbert's capacity for insight is also suggested by the initial construction of Xanadu, which was built to defy the limits of "usefulness" and the merely "necessary" or "practical," altogether surpassing the "intolerably grey and Australian" aesthetic dissected by Robin Boyd (13). But unlike Mary, Norbert is unable to harness these visionary intimations in a way that leads to exultation, liberation, or transcendence. Instead, he is known for his ceremonial disposition and predilection for "strong drink" (17), and under Norbert's watch Xanadu is "less disturbed by transcendental problems than by the economic and social ones which come to those who enjoy nerves and invested income" (30).

But the "transcendental problems" or spiritual and metaphysical questions cast aside by the upper class, occupied as they are by an effete self-centred life, also offer the most transformative solutions. In this regard, the characterisation of Norbert Hare, particularly in relation to Xanadu and as contrasted with Mary Hare, suggests that humility and a spiritual orientation are key to accessing the full vision of the chariot. As in *Voss*, apotheosis is not merely a matter of individual genius or insight but is tied to the ability to accept such apprehension, alongside instruction from a local wilderness, rather than succumb to hubris or conform to the pressures of assimilation.

Norbert's difficulty in surrendering, either to his vision of the chariot or indeed the natural world, finds an empirical counterpart in the gardens of the Xanadu estate. For him, setting out to create a garden that matched the extravagance of Xanadu meant the creation of

carefully manicured lawns and plots, but this design fundamentally failed to account for Australian nature. Consequently, “the scrub, which had been pushed back, immediately began to tangle with Norbert Hare’s wilfully created park” (17). The failure of Norbert’s project and the triumph of the natural world are thrown into stark relief with a proleptic shift to his adult daughter, Mary Hare, “kneeling in a tunnel of twigs which led to Xanadu” (18). The natural world has prevailed over the crumbling mansion, but rather than diminishing the splendour or grand purpose of the estate, the wild terrain elevates it. In this regard, the apparent disintegration of Xanadu in fact reveals hidden depths and an immutable beauty.

The pronounced differences between Norbert’s interactions with Xanadu and those of Mary suggest that the gifts of the natural world are unlocked by the humility and perspicacity of its beholders. In the hands of Mary Hare, the potential of Xanadu, most especially its surrounding wild terrain, to yield other insights becomes apparent:

> So Miss Hare came home, as always, for the first time. She stepped out beyond the trees where lawn began. Certainly the grass appeared a bit neglected, but the eyes, and not necessarily the eyes of a lover, were invariably transfixed by their first glimpse of Xanadu. Miss Hare herself had almost crumbled as she stood to watch her vision form. (20)

The miracle, this revelation of supernatural radiance, is repeated daily, whether in the rising sun or Miss Hare’s kindled vision. Divinity, no less than the ensnaring toils of evil, is ever present and accessible to those capable of embracing a higher awareness. Miss Hare’s return home is carefully staged and introduces major perceptual preoccupations. When she steps out from behind the shroud of thickly packed trees and shrubbery, Xanadu is revealed as though through parting curtains on a stage. This is no mere house, at least not for this acolyte, and it emerges more like an epiphany than a building. Like a largesse delivered from beyond the human realm, Xanadu is arresting in its glory. Lest readers suspect that Hare is merely

mistaken, or moved by her own history with the place, White reminds us that this is not the effect of "the eyes of a lover" (20). Hare's vision is real. Despite areas of aesthetic dilapidation, Xanadu embodies something beautiful, even otherworldly. Hare's perception, however, is as central to this unfolding marvel as Xanadu itself. She is moved not simply by Xanadu, but by her "vision" of it (20). The acuity of her insight coupled with the revelation of Xanadu are perennially overwhelming and she crumbles before it, suggesting the surrender of individual ego to some higher order, be it to the natural world or a providential power.

This encounter is far more than a belated Wordsworthian example of nature's ministry to the individual but is couched in more sinister terms as a conspiracy. In White's fictional realm, nature is so embattled, as are inclinations to transcendence, that any instructive traffic between it and individual vision, in a sphere dominated by their contrary, must presumably assume a clandestine form. Thus, in *Riders in the Chariot* a providential pact, which occurs in association with nature, is played off against a collusion among devilish forces. The first, a "conspiracy with nature," is introduced with unambiguous images of celestial expansion and enlightenment (377):

> That summer the structure of Xanadu, which had already entered into a conspiracy with nature, opened still farther. Creatures were admitted that had never been inside before, and what had hitherto appeared to be a curtain, loosely woven of light and leaves, was, in fact, seen to be a wall. That which had been hung for privacy, might in the end, it now seemed, stand solider than the substance of stone and mortar which it had been its duty to conceal. (377)

Unbound nature, which Norbert had tried to replace with a manicured park, stands here as the most abiding "Pleasure Dome" (17). Under the stewardship of Mary, a "wild thing" herself, the building becomes overgrown—critters, light, and leaves are all granted unfettered access (16). Conventional partitions of fixed concrete or similarly solid materials have seemingly

disappeared, and Xanadu is enshrouded by foliage. Far from transient or flimsy, however, this natural abutment proves "solider than the substance of stone and mortar which it had been its duty to conceal" (377). The gentler machinations of the natural world might appear tenuous, but they undoubtedly endure. Alongside the apparently desolate mansion, nature affords portals, or to borrow Coleridge's words, "caverns measureless to man." To human conspirators capable of perceiving them, such caverns are replete with wonder.

These partnerships are part of the greater war between evil and good, with their human co-conspirators in the natural world. While Xanadu and Mary have their conspiracy with nature, Mrs Jolley is engaged in a "conspiracy" with "another devil," Mrs Flack (201). This primal binary is often explicit. For example, a heavenly scene at Xanadu, in which "languid stalks of grass were engaged in their dance of transparent joyfulness" and "a plain-song of bees fell in solid gold" is interrupted—indeed "shoved" back—by the arrival of Mrs Jolley (201). In contrast to Xanadu's alignment with regenerative nature and providence, the details of this sinister player are introduced with images of a reeling natural world:

> A pillar of black and white had risen in the depths of the abandoned orchard, but moving and swaying. Silence creaked, and the weed towers were rendered into nothing. Plumes of dust and seed rose. (201)

In stark opposition to the expansive light and leaves of Mary's entry, Jolley is associated from the outset with images of apocalyptic darkness—towers rendered null and void, with obscurity and darkness auguring dire destruction. Nature is unwilling to be part of this particular pact. Later in the novel, this duality is reinforced when Hare's attempts at "loving-kindness" are "obliterated" by the "conspiracy of evil minds" (388). Within White's moral universe, it is abundantly clear who falls on the side of good or of sinuous evil.

Throughout *Riders in the Chariot*, the Brighta Bicycle Lamps factory in Barranugli operates as a countervailing force to Xanadu. The suburb, as the name suggests, represents the

ugliest and most barren aspect of suburbia, which is not a natural landscape at all but formed in a negative "conspiracy" with a human state of mind (388). While a "Pleasure Dome" can be created by an interaction between chosen, visionary individuals and the natural world (17), a veritable hell-scape is also possible when the dominant individuals in an environment reflect the dark undersides of creation, the "burnt-out blackberry bushes, lolling and waiting in rusty coils" (7). The bicycle factory is significant for what it represents. Xanadu is the folly of one man, but the bicycle factory is a microcosm of nascent industrial and capitalist enterprise in Australia. It is the folly of an entire civilisation. Here personal antitheses are drawn and have larger social repercussions. Dubbo and Himmelfarb, two outcast workers, represent the possibilities for humankind alongside offering an answer to the question of what happens when two visionaries end up in a suburban factory.

The introduction of the factory produces an imaginative meaning where the forces of human-made technology and malevolence are clearly on display. Here the conspiracy rests not in a clandestine pact between human goodness and the natural world but between the "oily guile" of the machines and the "hatred" stewing in its workers:

> The machinery was going round and round, and in and out, and up and down, with such a battering and nattering, though in one corner it slugged and glugged with a kind of oily guile, and through a doorway which opened on to a small, wet, concrete yard, in which an almost naked youth in rubber boots officiated with contempt, it hissed and pissed at times with an intensity that conveyed hatred through the whole shuddering establishment. (259)

Joy, fulfilment, and bounteous nature are all absent. Instead, the passage suggests the factory itself as a conduit for evil, foreshadowing the final acts of brutal xenophobia that take place there. Beastly impressions and the evocation of negative human qualities are interspersed with images of violent, mechanical potential: "it hissed and pissed at times with an intensity that

conveyed hatred through the whole shuddering establishment" (259). While the repetition and alliteration highlight the constant motion and mindless production of the factory, the animal imagery underscores the sense in which technology assumes a life of its own, its hatred permeating through "the whole shuddering establishment" like some monstrous, industrial spectre.

The factory is a primary site of dehumanisation. Its unfeeling processes and cold metal ensure this, as do the heated passions of its work force. Among it, endemic local racism and xenophobia are brutally on display. This prejudice also facilitates the dehumanisation of Himmelfarb and ensures that the violence undertaken against him by Blue and the Lucky Sevens can be dismissed as inconsequential, even prosaic, despite the loss of life. As Ernie Theobalds, who is eventually prompted by Rosetree to intervene in the crucifixion, asserts: "It ain't nothun to get worked up over" (542). The final line of the chapter reinforces the sense in which the triumph of hatred, or indeed evil, only requires ordinary people to look aside: "Although nobody watched, everybody saw" (545).[51] Within the confines of the factory, human beings become "human mechanism[s]," separated from any spiritual or emotional dimension (526). In this regard, the constraints and dehumanising effects of life as an industrial worker amplify psychological and spiritual travails, even in the visionary riders. For example, Dubbo and Himmelfarb are described, after sharing a moment of intimacy and camaraderie, as returning slavishly to work: "for the machines were deriding them as they belted hell out of Rosetree's shed" (406). Connection is broken by the intrusion of industrial routine. Such pressures do not detract from the visionary power of the riders but compound their suffering and suburban alienation. Significantly, the machines are also described as

[51] For example, in his speech for the award of Australian of the Year in 1974, White declared: "we still have that apparently insoluble problem of what to do about the Aborigines we dispossessed" ("Australian of the Year" 47). Years later, White made a similar comment in another public address: "More than anything else, it was the need for justice for the Aborigine [sic] which put me against the Bi. Very little has been done to give them a sense of security in the country we invaded. Aborigines may not be shot and poisoned as they were … but there are subtler ways of poisoning them" ("The Bicentenary" 183).

having “belted hell out of Rosetree’s shed,” suggesting that the heavenly vision shared by the riders has found its direct, diabolical antithesis in the factory. In accordance with Brady’s assertion that the suburb in White was part of a broader interest in “a spiritual, rather than a social condition,” the machinery of the bicycle factory represents some of the most serious spiritual afflictions facing his suburban characters: a combination of guile, hatred, and conformity (“God, History, and Patrick White” 172).

Despite his often-poor execution, White’s Indigenous characters are undoubtedly cast among his most visionary and sagacious. Considering *Voss* (1957) and *Riders in the Chariot* (1961) together highlights one of White’s key aims in characterisation, which was not to reduce the humanity of characters, but to impugn the routine endorsement of inflexible rationality and materialism over imagination. In its place, White offers an epistemology that encompasses creative vision and imagination. Sending Indigenous characters into the service of his own epistemological agenda, however, mars White’s fiction time and again. While many settler characters similarly further White’s indictment of rigid reason and technological progress, his deployment of Indigenous characters to sanction a settler mission is at best gauche and incommensurate with his agenda, and at worst deeply dehumanising. For example, White’s tendency to use visionary protagonists as exemplars of an alternative world and value-set is certainly apparent in the characterisation of Miss Hare, but it also factors into the portrayal of the Indigenous painter Alf Dubbo. Unlike Hare, or indeed Jackie, Dubbo is not animalistic and shows no special affinity for the natural world. In many ways, he is a fuller and more complex figure than the Indigenous characters in *Voss*. As one of the riders, Dubbo receives the vision of Ezekiel’s chariot, and in this respect is granted a spiritually privileged status alongside Mary Hare, Himmelfarb, and Mrs Godbold. Rather than conforming to the noble savage trope, as Jackie and Dugald do, Dubbo is portrayed as a stereotypical European tragic artist: poor, damaged, isolated, and dedicated to his art at all

costs.[52] The detail and complexity of Dubbo do more to illustrate his humanity than the delineation of the often-nameless Indigenous figures of *Voss*.

The avoidance of dehumanising tropes is not a particularly demanding standard, however, and in doing so White ends up deferring to a distinct but no less mechanistic form of Indigenous characterisation. As Jeanine Leane outlines in "Tracking Our Country in Settler Literature" (2014), Australian literature has an established history of assigning Indigenous characters the alternate forms of savagery and tragedy:

> The half-caste, mixed race characters as defined by blood in these novels are as tragic as the full bloods are savage—as represented for example by Bobwirridirridi in *Poor Fellow My Country*. There's a distinct divide here in Aboriginal representation between the savage and the tragic. (3)

Xavier Herbert's *Poor Fellow My Country* was written in 1975, over ten years after the publication of *Riders in the Chariot* (1961). White's Alf Dubbo may have been a detailed portrait of an Indigenous character, but it is part of a tradition in Australian writing, as Leane notes, that dates back at least to Katharine Susannah Prichard's *Coonardoo* (1929). White's canonical status has arguably legitimised this tradition and ensured its survival well into the twenty-first century.[53]

Alf Dubbo is unequivocally a central character, however, and arguably embodies the key message of the novel: the limits of sense perception and the possibilities of the infinite. The process of Dubbo's painting recalls White's epigraph from William Blake at the outset of *Riders in the Chariot*, which speaks to the limits of "finite organical perception" and links the apprehension of the infinite, or a measure of understanding beyond sensory experience, with personal suffering and exile. At the end of the quoted passage from "The Marriage of Heaven

[52] This trope is explored further in Chapter Three and Four.
[53] This settler tradition of writing Indigenous characters—and White's reinforcement of it—is explored further in subsequent chapters.

and Hell," Ezekiel is asked why "he eat[s] dung, & lay[s] so long on his right & left side?" (qtd. in *Riders in the Chariot* 3). He responds: "the desire of raising other men into a perception of the infinite ... is he honest who resists his genius or conscience only for the sake of present ease or gratification?" (3). A parallel can be drawn between Dubbo's exiled status in the suburb, on account of his venereal disease and Indigenous heritage, and Ezekiel's refusal to abrogate his association with the abject or uncivilised. Like White's other painter from his novel *The Vivisector* (1970), Hurtle Duffield, Dubbo seeks "the understanding and realisation of infinity."[54] Days after having "taken to his bed" (590), composing landscapes through a window as he lies on his side, and through "shrivelled" guts and "melancholy," Dubbo eventually succumbs to a "compulsion" to paint (591). Once he begins, his vision of the infinite is channelled through the earthly realm and its experiences of suffering, sickness, and cruelty.

It is not solely Dubbo's suffering, eccentricity, or even insight that ultimately enables his glimpse of the infinite, and his "raising" of "other men into a perception of the infinite," but his unwillingness to compromise or conceal any of these parts of himself. In other words, like Ezekiel, Dubbo will not, in Blake's words, "resist his genius or conscience only for the sake of present ease or gratification." In this regard, the vital distinguishing factor in White's visionaries is not simply that they possess insight, or suffer and experience alienation, but instead rests in their refusal to subordinate vision and imagination to the social order.

Though residing in the same region as White's visionary riders, Blue symbolises the most sinister and violent aspects of suburbia. Encapsulating all that White decried about the suburb in "The Prodigal Son," Blue recalls the essay's famous condemnation of suburban-Australia, in which "teeth fall like autumn leaves" and "blind, blue eyes" and "muscles" prevail ("The Prodigal Son" 15):

[54]From the epigraph to *The Vivisector* (1970), citing the artist Ben Nicholson.

> Blue had always been primarily a torso, an Antinoüs of the suburbs, breasts emphatically divided on unfeeling marble, or Roman sandstone. Somebody had battered the head, or else the sculptor had recoiled before giving precise form to a vision of which he was ashamed. Whether damaged, or unfinished, the head was infallibly suggestive. Out of the impervious eyes, which should have conveyed at most the finite beauty of stone, filtered glimpses of an infinite squalor: slops of the saloon, the dissolving cigarette-butts, reflections of the grey monotonies, the greenish lusts. The mouth was a means of devouring. If ever it opened on words – for it was sometimes necessary to communicate – these issued bound with the brass of beer, from between rotting stumps of teeth. (*Riders in the Chariot* 530)

The remarkable parallel to White's "The Prodigal Son," which was published three years before *Riders in the Chariot*, points to Blue as a paragon of middle Australia. Like the blind, muscled brute with brittle teeth of White's essay, Blue is "primarily a torso," his teeth "rotting stumps" (*Riders in the Chariot* 530). But in Blue we see its complete degradation. The seat of individual vision, in this instance, is variously elucidated as impervious, damaged, and horrifically repulsive. Blue's eyes, like this mind, are completely closed off. Never will nature reveal its wonders to him or White's self-satisfied materialists. To them it is something to be dwarfed and permanently closed off. Blue's depiction in terms of stone, as the "Antinoüs of the suburbs," also highlights his durable, representative status in the community: he is a parodic luminary upon which mediocrity has pinned its hopes. "Infallibly suggestive" allows a bold merging of the unfeeling and statuesque with its favoured, repulsive surroundings—saloon slops, defunct cigarette butts, and a general environment of squalor. The inversion of finite and infinite summarises White's critique. Whereas a finely wrought classical figure elevates and may evoke the unbounded, here any glimmering of infinity is in the endless signs of human despoiling.

Blue's depiction, littered with the expected refuse of suburban life, also suggests a correlation between human society and the factory more generally. Both social and industrial machinery can produce and promulgate blindly and unthinkingly, be they ideas or goods, and deliver ends abstracted from the means of production. In other words, there is a parallel between what Andrew McCann terms the "performativity of normality and the violence this can entail" and the mechanical performance of the factory technology ("The Ethics of Abjection: Patrick White's *Riders in the Chariot* (1961)" 146). In this regard, materialism, industrialisation, and the banality of the everyday—often characteristic of suburbia—are linked explicitly with the "banality" of hatred and indeed evil (*Riders in the Chariot* 607). Just as the factory commands assimilation from its workers, in the suburbs more generally "humidity and conformity remained around 93" (499).

At the end of the novel, Xanadu is eventually flattened after Mary Hare's disappearance, leaving only a "desert of blonde dust" (612). Out of the wreckage, a suburban analogue of the sandy frontier and resplendent red centre of White's interior emerges, but rather than symbolising sublime potential, this desert signifies destruction and collapse. Trees are removed for "commercial possibilities" (624) and in their stead a series of reproducible "sugar cubes of homes" are installed, subject to ready dissolution and consumption (636). In this respect, *Riders in the Chariot* concludes with a sense of the intransigent march of material progress and its effacement of the natural world. If the novel ended on this note, the idea that White was ambivalent about the suburb, or advocated for its potential, would be difficult to defend. But *Riders in the Chariot* does not conclude with this image.

Instead, the final pages reinforce White's most consistent messaging: that environments are determined by the interaction—or "conspiracy"—of the natural world with chosen individuals and their perceptive faculties (377). Even with the destruction of the grand Xanadu estate, the unthinking extraction of resources, and the instalment of suburban lots, the

narrator concludes that "certainty was here, and goodness must return, like grass" (611). The final images of Xanadu are transmitted through Mrs Godbold, who is steadied by "her own vision of the Chariot," and "could not help admiring the houses for their signs of life: for the children coming home from school, for a row of young cauliflowers, for a convalescent woman, who had stepped outside in her dressing gown to gather a late rose" (640). Through Mrs Godbold, small, ordinary details are brought into focus and exhibited for their magnificence. This is not a mystical vision, or even some portentous sign of a dying wilderness—White's final image is a testament to all life and its endurance. As the narrator underscores, the "black trunks of oaks and elm, and ghostlier gums which Mr Norbert Hare had overlooked, would rise again out of the suburban lots" (641). Whether in the suburb or in the desert, life springs eternal for White's visionaries. The discernment of this regeneration—be it as a desert rain shower, a planted bed of vegetables in a suburban backyard, or an emergent eucalypt—overwhelmingly depends on the individual and their capacity for insight.

Taken in succession, *Voss* (1957) and *Riders in the Chariot* (1961) suggest that White's shift towards positive representations of the literal desert was complemented by a tendency to identify the urban spaces created by settlers as metaphorical deserts. In this way, White's post-war fiction might be said to relocate the "Great Australian Emptiness" to parlour scenes and suburban sitting rooms, while the once maligned desert becomes a site ready to promote deeper understanding ("The Prodigal Son" 15). White's depiction of suburbia, home of hollow hearts and sinister intents shrouded by the "impeccable veneer" of new brick houses, resonated with the experience of many younger writers and emerged as an enduring influence in Australian literature (*Riders in the Chariot* 94). Yet, alongside the oppressive aspects of the suburb, White considers its possibilities—for human connection, harmony maintained or lost with nature, and even spiritual revelation. Rather than a simple binary in which the desert exalts, and the suburb oppresses, White approaches these terrains as

multivalent and complex environments. Far from merely criticising or condemning the suburb, White asks: how can we distinguish something worthwhile among the ugliness, the "muckheap" (Clements 133)? The answer, it seems, is in both the visionary gifts of unique individuals and their communion with the natural world.

When White returned to Australia in 1948, he began a project of recasting Australian land, showcasing its mystery, poetry, and capacity for spiritual rejuvenation. In this respect, White's project brought a regenerative Australian landscape to the foreground of its national literature. *The Aunt's Story* (1948) established White's focus on visionary characters and the centrality of imaginative perception to understanding the Australian environment. While still focusing on strong, central protagonists and their visionary capacity, *Voss* (1957) brought the Australian interior—and its landscapes—into the fore. There is arguably another desert, however, which he explored in equal measure—the desert of the human mind. For White, it is individual vision and innate capacity that bring great insight. The unbridled intellect can be a source of arrogance and unchallenged notions of Western progress, and its dark potential is clear in the urban and suburban spaces of White's next novel, *Riders in the Chariot* (1961), as well as in Europe's enactment of the holocaust. Far from coincidental, the sequence of these novels affords a single thesis in which White neither advocates solely for the geographical desert nor its metaphoric counterpart in the suburb, but foregrounds perception as the surest path to spiritual revelation. The implied universality of White's visionary perception has deep links to the Romantic tradition and informs various contemporary writers, including David Malouf. What becomes clear in Chapter Three, however, is that this settler tradition of writing the land is sometimes limited by its own capaciousness, facilitating indeterminacy, misrepresentation, and uncertainty alongside possibility.

Chapter 3: White's Environmental Vision – Influence and Ambivalence in the Fiction of David Malouf

In the fictional worlds of Patrick White, the exquisite beauty and potential of Australian nature are dependent on the visionary faculties of its beholders. This idea of a bountiful Australian environment—revealed only to select inhabitants—reverberates throughout the works of many contemporary settler-Australian writers. From David Malouf's first novel *Johnno* (1975) through to his most recent short fiction, the author demonstrably engages with Patrick White's recordings and mythologies of local nature. While many scholars recognise parallels between White and Malouf, there are few sustained critical pieces detailing White's influence on the younger author. But far from a mere inheritor, Malouf develops a unique perspective on the Australian landscape that contains both the possibilities and limits of an imaginative connection to the land.

Tracing Malouf's authorial evolution from *Johnno* (1975) through to *Remembering Babylon* (1993) and "The Valley of the Lagoons" (2006), two key changes emerge. Firstly, perception and exploration of the local land remain central but evolve significantly throughout Malouf's career. In *Johnno*, perception results in the death of the settler-explorer in an iconic Australian landscape. In *Remembering Babylon*, perception and exploration are part of rapprochement, particularly between settlers, the land, and its Indigenous custodians. Secondly, and in contrast to White, the power of an imaginative connection to the land is increasingly problematised across Malouf's oeuvre, culminating in an exploration of the limits of settler vision in "The Valley of Lagoons." Malouf's visionary characters slowly learn to survive Australian nature—and so must reckon with it. In his increasingly ambiguous exploration of the role of the individual in the local environment, Malouf's fiction highlights a central problem in White's landscape legacy: in their undoubtedly earnest attempts to poeticise and celebrate the local environment, both authors become part of a tradition that

relies on an Indigenous presence in nature to facilitate (typically white) settler belonging. While this point has been made before regarding both authors, it is seldom considered in terms of either White's influence or the environmental turn in literary studies.

Far from coincidental, the joint interest of White and Malouf in the abiding power of visionary perception reveals a shared literary heritage and key ideas and beliefs underpinning their fictional work. Among these antecedents, the famed and often tragic figure of William Blake exemplifies the cardinal role of imagination, the place of the infinite, and the costs of creative vision that mark the literary oeuvres of White and Malouf. From the inclusion of Blake's poetry as epigraphs to their work, through to an appropriation of central themes, the consistent engagement of both authors with Blake suggests something deeper than mere aesthetic interest. Arguably, the significance of Blake to both authors illuminates the driving principle of perception in their fiction.

The distinction Blake draws between sense perception, or seeing with the eye, and imaginative perception, seeing through the eye, is well-established and a position Malouf and White echo in their fiction (Gleckner 1). In brief, Blake suggests that with the power of imagination, human beings are capable of transcending ordinary sense-perception and achieving glimpses of infinity. The epigraphs from White's *Riders in the Chariot* (1961) and Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* (1993) are both drawn from Blake's poetry, specifically the "Marriage of Heaven and Hell" and "The Four Zoas" respectively. White's selection captures Blake's position on perception, while the epigraph from *Remembering Babylon* recalls ideas of exile and home. The latter quotation reads: "Whether this is Jerusalem or Babylon we know not." Malouf's epigraph, from one of Blake's most complex and lesser-known works, suggests his deliberate messaging. Throughout "The Four Zoas," Babylon is often referred to somewhat ambiguously as "Vala," but Malouf has chosen an excerpt in which he can be assured that the meaning of his reference is clear: a fallen world and pre-eminent place of

exile is juxtaposed with an elusive, sacred homeland. In the context of the novel it precedes, *Remembering Babylon*, Malouf's selection implies that perception alone determines whether we live in exile or at home and in hope. If Australia's explorers have been blinded by their limitation to the "five senses" that "enclose" (Blake, "Daughters of Albion" 2.31), the artists and seers of White's and Malouf's fiction reveal the landscape through perception of everything "as it is, infinite" (Blake, "Heaven and Hell" 14.15). While settlers may never know absolutely whether they are in Babylon or Jerusalem, in their invocation of Blake's vision, White and Malouf appear to suggest that perception—or the lack of it—is the final arbiter.

David Malouf on Patrick White

While many writers could be named as inheritors of Patrick White, David Malouf stands apart for his extensive critical engagement with the author. Renowned for his intellectual acuity as well as his fictional prowess, Malouf has speculated insightfully on the compositions, motivations, and individual vision of many writers, but rarely more incisively than on Patrick White. In one such review of White's work, "Timon in Centennial Park," the title alone captures his precursor's public surliness and notoriously fickle temperament.[55] Although

[55] The title refers to the acerbic titular character from Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens: The Life of Timon of Athens* (1623). From 1963, after a "great upheaval" (*Flaws in the Glass* 147) from Castle Hill, White lived in Centennial Park in Sydney's eastern suburbs. In 1972, White gave his first impassioned political speech in defence of the urban oasis, bidding attendees to "hang onto your breathing spaces in this developing and already over-congested city. Protect your parks from the pressure of political concrete" ("A Living Living-Room" 28). In 2002, the director of Centennial Parklands Peter Duncan named Patrick White, "among other prominent supporters" (2), as the reason the Park exists "as it is today" (2). White went on to become "a founder of the Friends of the Green Bans Movement together with Jack Mundey" and others ("A Living Living-Room" 30). Alongside Mundey, White's role has been described by some scholars as pivotal, contributing to a "new epoch" that in turn "gave rise to the modern environmental movement, which along with the plethora of other social concerns that spilled from the 1960s became a key dimension of the Australian New Left" (Ferguson 74).

In terms of White's reputation, it was undoubtedly apocryphal, but the wealth of paratexts around White's fiction suggest it has some merit. For example, White was an active correspondent, as his collected letters suggest, with a reputation as a difficult and at times "aggressively unlikeable" man (Malouf, "Timon in Centennial Park" 304). In "Yrs Patrick," Karen Lamb describes the "proximate and even fashionable views of him as a bit of a curmudgeon" in the context of letters between him and Australian writer Thea Astley (60). Rather than adhering

acknowledging White's human weakness and fallibility, Malouf nonetheless elevates White to the status of "god," but judges his creative vision as a "stern" one:

> White is a stern god. He loves best those of his characters who are most tormented, those whom he has chosen to torment. "Lacerations and visions"—a phrase used here [in *Flaws in the Glass*] of the Greek experience—comes close to defining the nature of his own experience of the world and law of the world he creates. (302)

The selected phrase at once sums up key affinities and points of departure between the two writers. Both White and Malouf are fascinated by vision and are knowledgeable about its intellectual antecedents. There is no shortage of reference to their shared Romantic heritage or interest in the visual arts in their fiction. White and Malouf, however, part company on the issue of "lacerations" (302).

For White, lacerations and flawed human bodies and minds are integral to his characters and their interactions with the world. His Waldo Brown in *The Solid Mandala* (1966) is a man of overweening literary pretensions, a mentally scarred sadist whose decrepit home reflects a deep spiritual bankruptcy. Similarly, *The Vivisector* (1970) sees Hurtle Duffield die in a state of partial paralysis, although the painter's infirmity imparts positive moral and spiritual change. Arrogance and misanthropy become untenable, and Duffield's formerly venomous disposition transforms into something softer. There is hope and change in White's fiction, as Duffield accepts care and assistance from his disabled sister and protégé in the completion of a final masterpiece. Yet the dark determinacy of White's character portraits, often simultaneously shaped by and reflected in the surrounding environment, cannot be overlooked. In *Riders in the Chariot* (1961), Alf Dubbo is found dead amid the leavings of his last, frenzied attempts to finish the painting of the chariot. In the squalor of Dubbo's surrounds, his artwork represents a divinity capable of withstanding earthly degradations. Art,

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to the popularised view of White as a benign "curmudgeon" (60), Lamb suggests a dynamic between Astley and White that highlighted the former's vulnerabilities and at times the latter's readiness to exploit them (60).

imagination, and even the human spirit endures, but for White the cost to the visionary individual is always profound.

In Malouf, however, the suffering of his characters is less debilitating and more clearly overcome; anguish is a comparatively viable avenue for positive transformation. In Malouf's *Harland's Half-acre* (1984), for example, the inveterate cultural pessimism of White capitulates to more promising literary forms in the modest inhabitants of Keen's Crossing. Despite significant adversity, Malouf's titular painter Frank Harland spends his final days in a "landscape without figures" that offers relative peace and artistic productivity—a dream that belonged more to White's inner life than his fiction (*Flaws in the Glass* 49).[56] Malouf's Ovid also stands contra to White's visionary characters. Far removed from the sickly scene of Dubbo's death, readers find Malouf's Ovid dancing at the end joyously towards oneness with the wilderness beyond. One can imagine that in White, such a protagonist might be drawn instead towards the destruction so feared by the barbarians. But in Malouf's *An Imaginary Life* (1978), nature and its offerings have left behind a threatening, wolf-like aspect to assume the beckoning form of a child. Far from the immovable suffering and oftentimes agonising deaths of White's characters, Malouf's second novel ends with an

[56] The painter on whom Frank Harland was based, Ian Fairweather, is significant to both David Malouf and Patrick White. The connection between Fairweather and this tradition of Australian writers, including Murray Bail and Gerald Murnane, is explored by Annette Stewart in "Art and the Australian Artist: In White, Malouf, Murnane and Bail" (1987). Fairweather famously spent his final years as a recluse on Bribie Island. In this way, a landscape of transcendence, aspirational for many of White's and Malouf's fictional characters, was ostensibly realised in the painter's own life. Fairweather resembles many of White's and Malouf's artist-explorers, having spent time lost at sea, in exile, and as a prisoner of war. White famously hung Fairweather's *Gethsemane* (1958) above his writing desk, later gifting the artwork to the Art Gallery of NSW (Figure 3). Another Australian author arguably indebted to White, Murray Bail, wrote a monograph on Fairweather that mentions the allegiance between the artist and White (although they never met):

> The myths in question were deep-seated, universals, although Fairweather's treatment of them is not among his best work. His reaction to the locally manufactured myths is revealed in a letter praising Patrick White's *Riders in the Chariot* and *Voss*. It includes a rare reference to another Australian painter. Fairweather could not see why "Leichardt [sic] has to be denigrated and the bandit Kelly receives VIP treatment – from Nolan. (*Fairweather* 170)

As will be explained, the mythology of Leichhardt (and for Malouf, certainly Fairweather himself) is variously repurposed in White and Malouf.

image of pebbles tumbling from the child's hands before assuming the richly promissory form of butterflies.

Figure 4. Patrick White's Study with Gethsemane, 1973

Figure 4. Marr, David. "Fragments & Furies." *The Sydney Morning Herald.* March 24, 2012, https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/books/fragments--furies-20120322-1vktf.html.

The landscapes of David Malouf range from the suburban outskirts of *Johnno* (1975) through to the verdant tableaux of the Roman Empire in *An Imaginary Life* (1978) and the flourishing vegetation of North Queensland in "The Valley of Lagoons" (2006). Among his most famous terrains is that of Brisbane—a city he vowed to turn into "a place that would exist powerfully in the lives of readers in the same way that Dickens's London does, or Dostoevsky's Petersburg" ("A Writing Life" 701). Passages redolent of the urban landscapes in White's *Riders in the Chariot* (1961) emerge frequently in Malouf's *Johnno*. For example, "the sprawling weatherboard city we had grown up in was being torn down at last to make way for something grander and more solid" has reverberations of White's manifold descriptions of suburban infrastructure, and even Norbert Hare's own exultant pleasure dome (*Johnno* 206). Rather than suggesting uncomplicated improvement, the "bright and solid"

materials of urban development routinely represent human emptiness and cultural decay (*Riders in the Chariot* 74). Much has been written about the poetic brilliance of Malouf's suburbs, his approaches to masculinity, and his eagerness to introduce the tropical North into Australian literature.[57] [58] Less considered is the function of the Australian landscape, its relationship to White, and its evolution throughout key works.

By focusing on the premises underlying Malouf's first landscape in *Johnno* (1975) and considering their evolution through *Remembering Babylon* (1993) and the "The Valley of Lagoons" (2006), notions central to the author's oeuvre, and indeed the Australian environment more generally, emerge. Like White, Malouf composes the environment according to ideas steeped in a Romantic heritage: perception and vision, exploration or adventure, a critique of Western "progress," and personal metamorphosis.[59] White's landscapes, as Malouf tells his readers, reflect those of a "stern god" ("Timon in Centennial

[57] These suggestions have been dismissed by Malouf—in an afterword for later editions he maintained that *Johnno* was not "a gay novel in disguise" (*Johnno* 244). For Don Randall, however, explorations of masculinity in *Johnno* are subsidiary to a greater interest in textuality. He suggests that "Dante's quest" primarily concerns "the value of texts and to find in texts a valid domain of masculine commitment and endeavour" (35). Landscape, too, has been addressed in relation to the novel, though chiefly in terms of Malouf's depiction of suburbia and attempts to include Brisbane in a literary imagination. In terms of its representation of the local suburb, O'Reilly notably suggests that *Johnno* reinforces an "anti-suburban tradition" in Australian writing ("Rejecting and Perpetuating the Anti-Suburban Tradition" 20), while in terms of reality, Daniel suggested that *Johnno* is a "New picaresque" which "pushes reality into new, more diverting shapes" (*Liars: Australian New Novelists* 26).

[58] *In Exploring Suburbia: The Suburbs in the Contemporary Australian Novel,* Nathanael O'Reilly devotes a chapter to Malouf's suburban landscape, especially Brisbane, exploring the author's "claims that Johnno, set largely in Brisbane during the 1940s and 1950s, broke new ground by engaging with the urban environment, stating that "no one else had got [Brisbane] into fiction' (Willbanks, Australian 145)'" (109). Pages 109-114 focus especially on this notion.

[59] Bridget Grogan links the Romantic transcendentalism of Malouf's fiction explicitly with Patrick White in "The Ayers Rock Experience: Reading to Recuperate the Lost in David Malouf's 'Mrs Porter and the Rock'" (2011): "Romantic transcendentalism in Australian literature, perhaps most strongly exemplified by Malouf's predecessor Patrick White, is not without its critics" (70). In "Remembering Inheritance: David Malouf and the Literary Cultivation of Nation" (2007), Brigid Rooney similarly suggests Malouf as an inheritor of White for related themes:

> Malouf's pursuit of the literary project of promoting settler-belonging, and of sacralising nation, has been steady, if not unremitting. Indeed, his assiduity raises the question of what is at stake. He is not alone in such a pursuit: the coalescence of literature, nation and the sacred performs a central role in the legitimation and consecration of writers, and likewise in the reproduction of the Australian literary field. Patrick White—both his writing and public persona—is the most obvious example of this nexus. (68)

The relationship between Patrick White and David Malouf is well-established in the field but can be expanded with analysis—that I hope to offer—tracing these authorial affinities in and across specific texts.

Park" 302), filled with suffering and an unwavering mythos in which the power of the land is illuminated, through imagination, to select and visionary figures. While much of this holds true in Malouf's own fiction, he is a softer, more pragmatic, and ambivalent "god" ("Timon in Centennial Park" 302). Foregrounding complexity, mirages, liminality, and increasingly the capacity to survive, Malouf creates Australian environments that hold oppositional and conditional truths that routinely undercut settler claims on the land. In other words, over the course of his career Malouf's characters learn to survive metamorphosis in the Australian environment, but their survival is increasingly enshrouded by a growing recognition of the limits of an imaginative connection to place. As we shall see, however, in resuming and extending White's landscape legacy, Malouf's fiction reveals some of the limits of the Nobel Laureate's environmental vision. The limits of settler perception that both authors explore ultimately apply to their own fictional powers, as well as their fictional worlds.

Johnno: Lies and Landscapes

Although published only two years after Patrick White won the Nobel Prize and offering many salient parallels to the author's work, *Johnno* (1975) is rarely discussed in these terms. Even fewer critics address the shared landscapes or explorer mythology of White and Malouf's first novels.[60] While writing in general terms, Karin Hansson perhaps comes closest when she suggests:

> The kind of identity with which Malouf and White are both concerned is of course neither national nor Australian, but primarily existential and universal. They are both writing about "the country of the mind" rather than Australia from a national or political point of view and in doing so they make a distinction between two categories

[60] While Nettelbeck does consider Malouf's explorer mythology, suggesting the ways in which "the narrative process of bringing space into being' decides 'how, and through whom, the conditions of knowledge will be exercised,", *Johnno* is notably absent from this discussion, as is White's influence (114).

> of people: explorers and stay-at-homes, imaginative sufferers and complacent materialists, losers and winners. (Hansson 16)

In Hansson's dialectic, imagination, exploration, and loss are aligned in an existential quest for the self and meaning. This association reinforces the idea that despite the assumption that maps, compasses, and other scientific instruments avowedly chart the true shape of reality, for White and Malouf exploration is an imaginative endeavour. Like art, exploration chiefly concerns the landscape or "country of the mind" (*Voss* 373). While both authors have concluded novels with "death, loss of personal identity, in a return to the natural world" and undoubtedly explore existential boundaries, for Malouf this terminal limit evolves throughout his career (16).[61] White and Malouf are guided by universal and existential themes, but they are also engaged in national mythmaking, most notably regarding the antipodean environment. Malouf's first novel, *Johnno*, reveals his formative understanding of perception, exploration, and the Australian landscape.

Johnno is fundamentally a tale of remembrance for a lost friend. Following the death of the narrator's father, the novel begins with Dante's return to the family home. Sifting through old photographs and the miscellaneous possessions of a late parent, Dante begins to reflect upon his childhood friend Johnno. Tracing their relationship through university and adulthood, the novel ends with the mysterious death of Johnno in Brisbane's Condamine River. This simple plot, essentially about love and loss, is set against a more complex unravelling of personhood and nation, or as Malouf terms it, "ways of feeling out, in likeness and contrast to others, the lines of what we are" (245). In this regard, the novel represents a starting point and driving telos for Malouf's fiction: the question of how settler-Australian characters might define and understand themselves within a new land.

[61] Hansson also cites Malouf's willingness to engage in public discourse and White's reluctance as a chief difference between them, which is perhaps reflective of their key departures: Malouf's later protagonists are often willing to change, or at least attempt to, while White's flawed visionaries are either reluctant or face significant internal barriers to change (16).

Two aspects of Malouf's *Johnno* make the titular character well-placed for such a mission: his enhanced perception and pursuit of exploration. From the outset of *Johnno*, the vagaries of perception are highlighted, with Johnno forming a special case. Described by his old friend Dante as being marked as a seer from his early school days, Johnno's visionary power is promptly brought to the reader's attention:

> What had caught my eye, and made me turn back and look again, was a small boy at the very edge of the picture, who wasn't staring out like the rest of us into some rectilinear future, but had cocked his head up, away from Mr. Peck's covered tripod, and was staring diagonally out of the frame. (13)

A child set apart, Johnno is marked by a difference in vision and a crucial ironic perspective. Unlike his classmates, who stare off into a future proceeding along a predictable and rigid axis, Johnno fixes his gaze upwards and athwart. He is unbound by the limits of conventional lines of sight and his life, the reader is led to suspect, will be defined by unique insight. Several key themes are thereby introduced, including Johnno's visionary capacity and an adventurous spirit that shapes his interactions with the natural world.

While Johnno's explorations are chiefly imaginative, with the great *terra incognita* as the human mind itself, exploration is not only symbolic. Johnno is a geologist and spends years trying to locate and orient the world cartographically. Between a summer abroad as a young man "mapping Lake Manchester" (74), a journey in the Congo, and his frustrated exhortations as a tourist "trying to make sense of a map" in Athens (104), Johnno's notional role of explorer is literal as well as philosophical. In this regard, his early "exile," or his standing apart on the school verandah, prefigures a more abiding experience of exile in the world (16). A hallmark of the explorer legend, this experience of exile links Johnno with Voss and Leichhardt before him.[62]

[62] Some biographical parallels between Johnno and Leichhardt, Australia's iconic lost explorer, have been overlooked in the secondary literature. Leichhardt, of course, is also the explorer upon which White's *Voss*

For White and Malouf, visionary characters and their perception and exploration of a "New World" are part of a national settler mythology. In White, the combination of vision and exploration often results in the promulgation of national mythologies. The silent everyman Stan Parker symbolises the modest possibility of settler communion with the bush, while *Voss* recasts the desert as a vibrant biosphere and illuminates the cost of being a visionary outsider in the settler-colonial state. In *Johnno*, however, instead of the expected drive to coalesce with the land, the eponymous anti-hero sets out to destroy "the myth" (122). The myth is never explicitly defined in *Johnno*, and critical interpretations vary. There is a precedent, however, for suggesting "the myth," alongside representing reality or consciousness, symbolises the nation (122). In "Immersed in Boredom: The Architecture of Brisbane in *Johnno,*" Christian Rafael Parreño Roldán poetically describes Johnno's death and his related drive to destroy the myth as suggesting "the incapacity to stay afloat in the city" that in turn "resulted in a fatal submersion, as if the Australia that Johnno wanted to expel ultimately consumed him" (146). The myth that *Johnno* sets out to destroy is also, as Roldán notes, the myth of the nation "consume[s] him" (146). As we shall see, Johnno eventually claims to have destroyed "the myth" but in the process dies in an iconic national river renowned for its role in Leichhardt's own ill-fated mission. The myth of the nation, and its related colonial-explorer mythology, is thus reinforced. The affecting tragedy of the novel

(1957) was based. Like Voss, Johnno is an imperfect visionary—in many ways a "madman"—and the legend of Leichhardt similarly foregrounds personal failure and eccentricity (*Johnno* 69). Later accounts even present the explorer as a "psychotic megalomaniac" (Martin 25). In Ernest Favenc's *Secrets of the Australian Desert*, for example, Leichhardt is the "mad lost doctor" (Hurley and Schlunke 537), full of "noble ideals" but in practical terms an "absolute failure" (Favenc 42). A biography by Catherine Drummond Cotton, published in 1938, was far more forgiving, casting Leichhardt as an ambitious, driven, and inevitably flawed man. The equation of the explorer with unstable dictators, as in Alec Chisholm's biography *Strange New World* (1941), was undoubtedly coloured by Leichhardt's German heritage and the unfolding Second World War. But in sexuality and class, Johnno and Leichhardt find further affinities. Johnno was raised by a working-class single mother and his sexual orientation was opaque enough to warrant direct address in Malouf's "Afterword" for *Johnno* (1997). Leichhardt's class status has likewise been described as "insecure, and his sexuality is ambiguous" (Martin 25). In this regard, and like Voss, both figures provide an "other to a mainstream English, middle-class, Anglican [Episcopalian] society and culture" (Martin 25). The many iterations of the explorer legend, including Malouf's adaptation, belie a profound connection between the discovery of Australia and the experience of exile, difference, and defeat.

is that Johnno's efforts to dismantle the state and its mythology instead culminate in its ascendancy. In this way, *Johnno* establishes a blueprint for Malouf's landscapes and their ultimate evolutions.

The reinforcement of this landscape myth in *Johnno* is indelibly tied to imperial narratives. In *Landscape and Power,* WJT Mitchell describes landscape as "the dreamwork of ideology" (7) and "intimately bound up with the discourses of imperialism" (9). With "dreamwork" understood in Freudian terms,[63] Mitchell suggests that landscape is a process that transforms "the latent content" of imperialism "into its manifest content, concealing its meaning … and thus allowing undisturbed" proliferation to occur ("dreamwork" *OED*). The hidden meaning of imperialism is revealed in the landscape insofar as the land is re-made in the image of the coloniser. But in this revisionary terrain, such changes appear natural, familiar, and inevitable. Imports stand alongside native flora and fauna, cultivated land bestrides the supposedly uncultivated, and the terrain more generally assumes the form of the imperial power. The unfamiliar, harsh environment that stunned early colonists and explorers becomes, over time, simply "Australian." The deceit here, where colonial landscapes conceal conquests and the existence of Traditional Owners, is narratological—its defining and unifying features are established through storytelling.[64] For example, in *Voss* (1957) a mythology of the land is created through a "legend" that is told and will be "written down," and it is in this narratological afterlife that he "did not die" but remains "in the country" (*Voss* 375). While arguably an idea that White arrives at over the course of his career preceding *Voss*, it is an idea that Malouf begins with. That is, the landscapes of Malouf's fiction are embedded in an acknowledgement of landscape as imperial dreamwork. In profound contrast

[63] The term "dreamwork" was coined by Sigmund Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams (1899)*, to which the dictionary definition defers.
[64] This relationship is evident in the history of settler-explorer mythology, and the novel itself has a place in this genre. As Paul Genoni articulates, in the "explorers' journals" Australian writers found "a plentiful source of metaphoric and imaginative detail with which to enrich their own writing about the same space" (19).

to an Indigenous notion of Dreaming or Dreamtime, Malouf's settler dreamwork includes the palpable and ongoing effects of imperialism alongside the settler longing to connect to the only environment they know.[65] Settler mythology of the Australian environment, in which brave explorers are celebrated and stories crafted about a forbidding interior, is an exemplar of concealed imperialism.

In *Johnno,* narrative and land coalesce from the outset. Itself an explicit act of first-person storytelling by Dante—Malouf's first poet in exile—the novel is a memorial to another "dead white male hero": Johnno himself (Martin 23). The types of reclamation that narrative can enact, whether of a relationship, memory, person, or nation, are central to the narrative. But Dante's authorial impetus, this drive to shape events in his retelling, is an enduring tension between the two main characters. In one of Johnno's final letters to Dante, he imparts this withering rebuke:

> Why don't you ever listen to what I say to you? I've spent years writing letters to you, and you never answer. Even when you write back. I've loved you—and you've never given a fuck for me, except as a character in one of your funny stories. (216)

While Johnno's letter reflexively casts doubt on Dante's narration—*Johnno* is one of Dante's stories, after all—it also captures a greater dissonance between the pair. Johnno's claim—that Dante never answers, even when he writes back—highlights the subjectivity of language and experience. Dante responds but Johnno reads only avoidance.

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[65] The Aboriginal conception of Dreamtime is difficult to address from a settler perspective: the English word is a settler-authored translation and presumes one stable meaning, when in reality its inflections undoubtedly vary across the culturally and linguistically diverse Indigenous communities in Australia. "Dreamtime" arose within English in the nineteenth century, penned by early Australian Anthropologists (notably WEH Stanner) to describe a white understanding of an Indigenous cosmology. The Oxford English dictionary describes its origin as "chiefly rendering Aranda (Northern Territory) altjerre dream (see alchera n.) and its derivative altjerreŋe," but the definition is designed for a settler audience:

> The addition of the element time n. in English was apparently an attempt to express the difference of this concept from ordinary night-time dreams. Compare dreaming n. 3 and the discussion at that entry. ("Dreamtime" *OED*)

The dictionary definition is appropriately bracketed—the Dreamtime is found "in the mythology of some Australian Aboriginal peoples" and denotes "the sacred time containing the creation of the first ancestors and the enduring existence of every person; a collection of events beyond living memory that shaped the physical, spiritual, and moral world" ("Dreamtime" *OED*).

Malouf's preoccupation with reality as narratological is fundamentally connected to the Australian landscape. As David Brooks suggests in "A Land Without Lendings: Judith Wright, Kenosis, and Australian Vision" (2000), there is something about the Australian context that lends it to an exploration of the "culture/nature border" (52):

> Actual, geographical exploration has accompanied the intellectual in such a way as offers, and enables us to talk about, Australia as metaphor. And a significant number of our writers—if not, perhaps, so many of their readers—have seen and employed this. It is a kind of secret Australian vision awaiting critical elaboration […] Perhaps, if we are determined to insist it into existence, we will have to find our identity in those few things that are constant, namely unrootedness, displacement, change, and the ontological anxiety or self-consciousness that these factors produce. (52-53)

Brooks places uncertainty at the epicentre of Australian land and identity. Geographical exploration was, from the outset, an imaginative and narratological endeavour: the country was being written as much as, if not more than, it was meaningfully being "discovered." For Malouf, this idea can be readily transferred to his metafictional practices or literary allusions—but it is also true of his landscapes and the Australian settler landscape more generally. Malouf's landscapes are rarely only mimetic, and instead convey national and inherited mythologies. The Australian landscape, as Malouf writes in "Second Nature," is an idea that has been transposed onto a pre-existing landscape, which itself was transferred onto the environment. The author's extensive knowledge of landscape history and conviction that Indigenous custodians of the land had already cultivated nature shapes his representations of the local land. For Malouf, the Australian landscape is always at least two landscapes: "the Western tradition of landscape thinking, and shaping and rendering, that goes back at least to the Renaissance," and "the other an indigenous [sic] tradition that reaches back millennia"

("Second Nature" 85). By definition, landscape is a curation, a narrative act, and a story told by different people about the land they stand on.

The result of Johnno's revelation that reality is "all lies" is a life marked by attempts to undermine grand narratives or myths, including the landscape (14). In his quest to "destroy the Myth" (113), Johnno proposes to put himself through

> a crash course in the disintegration of consciousness. It was a systematic program. You began with something simple like an act of theft and you went step by step to the end. Destroying the myth was a process like any other. (122)

In seeking the rapid, albeit methodical, dissolution of awareness, Johnno proposes obliteration of consciousness, or death, as the only viable means of "destroying the myth" (122). And like the settlement of Australia—with *terra nullius* as arguably the greatest national myth there is—"you began with something simple like an act of theft and you went step by step to the end" (122). Johnno, of course, does not invade a continent, but instead embarks upon "a prodigious programme of shoplifting" (122). By embodying unique perception, exploration, foolhardy endeavour, theft and rebellion, and finally death in local nature, Johnno's life offers a parallel to the course of empire. In fact, Johnno is an unheralded symbol of the failures and obstinacies of the Australian colonial project.

In the final chapter of *Johnno*, Dante reflects on his late friend's claim to have finally "destroyed the myth" (229). In death Johnno certainly achieved this aim, insofar as "the myth" is "consciousness" (122). But throughout the novel, the myths that Johnno longs to destroy are various: apart from consciousness itself, he seeks the destruction of nation-states, relationships, ideologies, and even stable identities. Foremost, however, the "myth" is Australia itself, a national narrative primarily forged in its landscapes and its failures. The minister presiding over Johnno's funeral recalls the losses at "Ypres, Mons, Gallipoli, Polzières, Bullecourt," placing Johnno among this "peculiar atmosphere of golden splendour

and colonial chivalry" (219-220). Not only is death a terminal limit, but the manner of Johnno's death reinforces two key settler mythologies: the lost explorer and the death of the settler in Australian nature. As Dante recalls:

> It was Johnno who was gone. Australia was still there, more loud-mouthed, prosperous, intractable as ever. Far from being destroyed, the Myth was booming. There were suggestions that it would soon be supporting thirty million souls. (212)

The idea, as Dante wagers, that "the Myth" is expanding and will imminently bear more "souls" reinforces the equation of "the Myth" with the nation-state and its landscapes. Against the mythology of a nation, Johnno's death, however "incontrovertible" (214), is a meaningless and feeble gesture.

The death of Johnno continues the established trope of Australian land as a literal and symbolic cemetery, enveloping explorers, exiles, and vagrants who the nation-state has rejected—not to mention the untold Indigenous lives lost through invasion. After a series of exchanges with Dante about destroying the myth, Johnno is found dead in a river as "perfectly safe" as a "suburban swimming pool" (228). The eventual demise of Johnno mirrors White's ill-fated explorers. While Philip Neilsen suggests this trajectory changes in Malouf's later work, he underscores the significance of Johnno's death because it implies "the impossibility of Johnno's quest to free himself from the soil of Australia, or perhaps, to suggest that he can only merge with the natural in defeat – unlike later Malouf protagonists" (Neilsen 33). Much like the fate of Voss and Leichhardt, Johnno's final resting place is both in an Australian natural environment and the narratives it inspires. Queensland's Condamine River receives Johnno with clemency, perhaps ending his suffering and enveloping him in a way that society—and indeed Dante— could not. Despite his life being defined by the pursuit to destroy "the Myth," the death of Johnno reproduces one of the most intractable Australian myths: the death of the settler-explorer in Australian nature (212).

Even before being fictionalised by an esteemed writer and public intellectual like Malouf, the Condamine has long been a symbolically potent landscape in Australian history. The symbolism is not lost on Dante, who reflects:

> And of all the rivers in the world that might have risen up to take him, it was the Condamine, whose course we had drawn in so often on our homework maps of Queensland and its river systems – the Condamine that we had represented, like all our rivers, with a blue line of solid ink, but which was, we knew, only the ghost of a river for two seasons of the year, a few glittering waterholes in a channel or ridged white sand, flowing furtively underground. In one of its more abundant moments it had reappeared to swallow him. (211)

The same river whose route Ludwig Leichhardt examined in 1847 and from where he began his final, ill-fated mission, the Condamine is integral to the mythology of the lost explorer and the death of the settler in the natural world. For the young Malouf, the price of being a visionary explorer is meted out by a stern god. Drowning in a shallow riverbed, Johnno ends his life as a lonely, ruddy, and bloated figure.

Alongside his eventual role in the narrative legends of men lost to the country, Johnno's death prompts a reflection upon "that inland sea, invisible to the eye, that the last century dreamed of but never discovered" (213). The inland sea, however, is not water at all, but a "black sea of oil untapped under impossible deserts" (213). The parallels to White here are pronounced. *Voss* concludes with both the death of an explorer in Australian nature and narratological perpetuity. Just as Laura assures the reader that Voss will live eternally through being "written down" (*Voss* 375), Johnno is granted perpetuity in Dante's narration. Likewise, the extractive potential of the desert in *Voss* is emphasised at the end of the novel, but such promise is dismissed in favour of more arcane and imaginative possibilities, such as narrative remembrance. The resident poet in Voss's convoy, Le Mesurier, describes the appeal of such

dreams: “There are such prospects. How can I make a fortune from merino sheep, when at the same time there is a dream of gold, or of some inland sea floating with tropical birds?” (*Voss* 79). Most pronounced, however, is the echo of White’s own first novel, which ends with characters “plunging inland” towards “the country of the future,” a land “for development” (*Happy Valley* 393). Australia’s great promise, as at the end of *Voss* and *Happy Valley*, is as shallow and spiritually fruitless for the young Malouf as it was for White. At the end of *Johnno*, the myth of Australia is, as the scornful Dante recounts, as “prosperous, intractable as ever” (212). Like his predecessor, however, Malouf sets out to create a different vision of Australian land over the course of his literary career.

In the eighteen years between *Johnno* (1975) and *Remembering Babylon* (1993), Malouf published five novels, many of which illustrate the author’s advancing notions of landscape and settler relations to it. *Remembering Babylon* (1993), however, marks a transition for Malouf. While *Harland’s Half-acre* (1984) invoked similar themes of landscape, perception, and imaginative possession of the land, *Remembering Babylon* is the first novel of Malouf’s that foregrounds Australia’s Indigenous history. The initial obstacles of settler-vision and the gap between British inheritance and Australian experience are brought into focus.

Remembering Babylon: Ambivalence and Immersion

The influence of Patrick White on David Malouf’s *Remembering Babylon* (1993) emerges in the exploration and perception of an unknown land. While White’s fiction unquestionably celebrates the power of imagination, in Malouf’s novel a visionary relationship with the land is drawn more cursorily. Without requisite ancestry or knowledge of the land settlers must imagine the power and relevance of local nature. This experience, however, is as shallow as it is sublime, an acknowledgement that pointedly differentiates Malouf from White.

Since its publication almost thirty years ago, *Remembering Babylon* has been the subject of extensive and at times contentious criticism. Much of this debate revolves around two oppositional lines of argument. The first is that the novel essentially sublimates Indigenous culture into a Eurocentric world view. Jo Jones, for example, argues that: "Malouf's well-intentioned vision of a unified and enlightened nation demonstrates a troubling tendency to project white, Eurocentric narratives and desires on to racial and cultural others" (70). In an early review, Peter Otto offers one of the most striking examples of this line of critique, suggesting that Malouf's romanticism enacts an "erasure of the political in *Remembering Babylon*, and in particular the use of the sublime to orchestrate his re-membering of colonialism" (546). Suvendrini Perera likewise describes the novel as "a Providentialist narrative of colonisation" (Perera 22), while Germaine Greer, in her characteristically direct style, suggests that the novel is simply white "supremacist fantasy" (Greer 1). The second and contrary view is that the novel in fact evokes the possibility of meaningful reconciliation. Critics like Bill Ashcroft underline the novel's engagement with "cultural possibility" (*On Post-Colonial Futures: Transformations of a Colonial Culture* 54). In "Craft and Politics: *Remembering Babylon*'s Postcolonial Responses" (1999), Lynn McCredden addressed this wide-ranging criticism, acknowledging that "there is some truth to these responses" (3) but that within the novel there are also "much bleaker, ironised moments than have been allowed" (4). Indeed, the chief ambiguity of *Remembering Babylon* is arguably that it does both: romantic, providential visions of colonisation and its aftermath are alternately questioned and reinforced.

The complex equations of land, heritage, and history that *Remembering Babylon* represents are considered at length in the secondary literature, but these discussions often overlook the novel's ambiguities. Addressing some of these omissions in "Reimagining the remembered: David Malouf and the Moral Implications of Myth" (2000), Carolyn Bliss

argues that the mythology of *Remembering Babylon* is fundamentally ambivalent, marking a vital change in the author's approach. For Bliss, one of the "most striking of these differences" between *An Imaginary Life* (1978) and *Remembering Babylon* (1993):

> is that the major character in *An Imaginary Life* succeeds in inhabiting then ultimately transcending his myth, while the major character in *Remembering Babylon* is defeated, perhaps even annihilated by his. I will argue finally that these different outcomes can be understood as marking a development in Malouf's deployment of myth, which in turn reflects his deepening understanding of the genre's attendant moral ambiguities. (725)

In contrast to the mythology of White, in which moral ambiguity is less central—he is a "stern god," after all—Malouf's fiction explores the uncertain place of settlers on Australian land (Malouf, "Timon in Centennial Park" 302). *Remembering Babylon* marks the beginning of Malouf's engagement with a First Nations perspective and, as Bliss argues, a "deepening understanding" of the "attendant moral ambiguities" of settler mythmaking (725). In an apparent bid to avoid a myth of moral totality, however, Malouf arguably succumbs to a different kind of mythmaking: one that endorses a "divine purpose" for the settler and the universalism of the Western imaginary (Leane, "Tracking Our Country in Settler Literature" 12).

Like *Voss* (1957)*, Remembering Babylon* (1993) is about a white man who enters the heart of Australia and is transformed—even redeemed—by it. The difference, of course, is that Gemmy returns from the interior, whereas Voss and Leichhardt remain. Upon his return, the physical and psychological changes undergone by Gemmy suggest that the land has performed its mysterious work. While *Voss* is based on the journals of Leichhardt and Eyre ("The Prodigal Son" 15), *Remembering Babylon* is based on Edmund Gregory's *Narrative of James Murrells' Seventeen Years' Exile Among the Wild Blacks of North Queensland*, a

historical text that Malouf describes as the "seed" of his novel (*Remembering Babylon* 202). As the title suggests, Gregory's work concerns the disappearance and return of James Murrell (or Jimmy Morill), a cabin boy and shipwreck survivor who spent seventeen years living in "exile" from 1846 to 1863 with the Juru, Gia, and Ngaro people in North Queensland. *Remembering Babylon* opens with Gemmy's return into settler society, where he must reconcile his Indigenous upbringing with both his British heritage and his new home in an Australian settler community.

Like a fairy-tale issued forth from White's "The Prodigal Son" (1958), *Remembering Babylon* begins with an extraordinary event emerging amid the ordinary.[1] The novel opens:

> One day in the middle of the nineteenth century, when settlement in Queensland had advanced little more than halfway up the coast, three children were playing at the edge of a paddock when they saw something extraordinary. (1)

What is seen and who sees is, from the outset, a central concern. Malouf establishes a classic, even prosaic, pastoral scene only to undercut it immediately with the introduction of something "extraordinary." In addition to prefiguring Gemmy's arrival, the opening page suggests that vision is linked to its beholders. Alluding to an unknown realm beyond "the edge of the paddock," Malouf's introduction establishes the basis for a countenance with the other.

In *Remembering Babylon*, Malouf uses the historical example of a settler immersed in Indigenous and imperial worlds to explore the fragility and hope of settler-belonging, chiefly sought through perception and exploration. These themes are focalised through three main characters: Gemmy, the "black-white man," Lachlan, his young settler friend, and Reverend Frazer, the local minister and amateur botanist who enlists Gemmy's help in reading the land (54). Moving beyond the trope of death in Australian nature, like White Malouf arrives at the

idea of a purely imaginative connection. Unlike White, however, Malouf acknowledges the essential self-deceit of such connection even while lauding its promise.

For Malouf, the inability of early settlers to survive the land is presented as a lack of perceptive vision, rather than as a testament to an infelicitous terrain. Many of these ideas around settler perception are explored through Frazer. His treatise on the landscape foregrounds the failures and possibilities of European vision:

> I think of our early settlers, starving on these shores in the midst of plenty they did not recognize, in a blessed nature of flesh fowl, fruit that was all around them and which they could not, with their English eyes, perceive, since the very habit and faculty that makes apprehensible to us what is known and expected dulls our sensitivity to other forms, even the most obvious. We must rub our eyes and look again, clear our minds of what we are looking for us to see what is there. (*Remembering Babylon* 118)

Frazer's observations recall the bleary English eyes that AG Stephens implored Australian settlers to open in 1901 ("The Bulletin"). In Malouf's novel, the limits of settler perception are repeatedly underlined:

> You blundered about seeing holes where in fact strong spirits were at work that had to be placated, and if you knew how to call them up, could be helpful. Half of what ought to have been bright and full of the breath of life to you was shrouded in mist. (58-9)

In this manner, Malouf suggests that the longstanding depiction of the countryside as harsh and inhospitable—indeed, as "impenetrable dark"—was a failure of perception, rather than of the land itself (7). Early in the novel, however, Frazer's exhortations about the land and its history are described as "mere guesswork" and "colonial fairytale" by Gemmy, highlighting the vulnerability of settlement and related ideas of national discovery (17). The idea that Frazer has struck upon the key to enhanced settler vision is subverted by the suggestion that any settler extolling the virtues of discovery is at risk of succumbing to a "colonial fairytale"

(17). Compared to Traditional Owners, settlers are inescapably remiss in their knowledge of the land.

The vulnerability of settlement and cognate notions of national discovery are not lost on Frazer, however, and he devises a solution to the perennial belatedness of the settler. "Is it not strange," he asks, "this history of ours in which explorers, men on the track of the unknown, fall dry-mouthed and exhausted in a country where natives, moving just ahead of them, or behind, or a mile to one side are living, as they have done for centuries, off the land?" (118-119). In much the same way that Patrick White contrasts the experience of explorers with that of Indigenous Australians over the same tract of land, Frazer highlights the disjuncture between colonial and Indigenous attitudes to the environment (*Voss* 79). The suffering of settlers is not attributable to the environment or hostile Indigenous people but stems from an unwillingness to see "what is there" rather than merely what they "are looking for" (*Remembering Babylon* 118). Like the eventual awakening of White's early visionaries, Frazer is beginning to understand that the settler, and not the land, has been at fault for its unsung potential.

Imaginative vision, in *Remembering Babylon* (1993) as in *Voss* (1957), is presented as an instrumental part of any successful exploration. Undoubtedly informed by White's fiction, the formative figures of Malouf establish a line of explorer-artists, be they geographers with artistic personas or poets wandering unknown lands.[66] In *Remembering* Babylon, Lachlan assumes this role, dreaming of adventure from a young age and eventually finding employment on the land "surveying the country to the north, preparing way for a highway" (177). The occupation carries him like a "thread of dust" (177) through manifold terrains: "little bourgeoning leap-frog settlements, sleepy harbour towns, gold mining camps, scattered dwellings round a railhead or timber-or sugar-mill" and onwards to "a hundred flash-flooding

[66] These figures appear in *Johnno* (1975) and *An Imaginary Life* (1978) respectively.

creeks and wide mangrove-fringed streams" (177-8). Reminiscent of the blazing seers of White's fiction, Lachlan longs for the kind of expedition that might "burn away" the "fragments of boyhood in him, and his exorbitant dreams" (178). While Voss became "the first, the burning element, that consumed obstacles, as well as indifference in others," Lachlan seeks an experience on the land to obliterate, in its magnitude, vestiges of a wistful youth (*Voss* 200). The settler-explorer, here, has advanced: rather than consuming "obstacles", the fire in Lachlan threatens to obliterate parts of himself (*Voss* 200).

For both authors, however, this kind of visionary perception is often cast as innate to Indigenous characters, and both novels propose Indigenous assistance as a solution to settler blindness. As a child, Lachlan dreams of finding Leichhardt with Gemmy's help. The proposed mission of Malouf's young, would-be explorer can be interpreted in three key ways. Firstly, it can be seen as acknowledging that Leichhardt's mission failed because it lacked imaginative perception. More than any other character, this perspective is reinforced by Reverend Frazer, who writes at length about the limits of European vision:

> We have been wrong to see this continent as hostile and infelicitous, so that only by the fiercest stoicism, a supreme resolution and force of will, and by felling, clearing, sowing with the seeds we have brought with us, and by importing sheep, cattle, rabbits, even the very birds of the air, can it be shaped and made habitable. It is habitable already. (118)

The presumption that the land can be bent to human will is not only redolent of imperial hubris but misses a vital aspect of Australian nature. The land, as Reverend Frazer sees it, was "habitable already" (118). Presumably, the subtext is that the land had already been inhabited for millennia. The emphasis placed by Malouf, through Frazer, on the failures of settler vision and extractive approaches to the land offers striking parallels to White's fiction. For example, the closing conversation of *Voss,* between the hero's spiritual companion Laura and the

"Englishmen" Mr Ludlow, Laura asserts that Australia is "in every way provided for, by God and Nature" (*Voss* 375). While White's version of Leichhardt keeps Australia's "dead white male heroes" lost in the interior, the return of Gemmy postulates an alternative fate. Gemmy is proof that the interior is survivable, after all (Martin 23).

Secondly, Lachlan's proposed mission suggests that European vision might be enhanced through an Indigenous aide. Lachlan has something that distinguishes his ambitions from the multiple failed journeys consigned to Australian history. In his fancy, he has Gemmy, a "black white" man "who was not white. His skin might be but not his features" (9, 36) who could act "as his guide" in a "search for Dr. Leichhardt" (54). Lachlan is assured that the pair would "find Leichhardt, or his bones at least," and return them in a symbolic gesture of reclamation (54). Such a reading suggests that Gemmy—a white man raised in an Indigenous community—might be able to lend Lachlan's mission an adequate understanding of the countryside. Finally, and as an extension of this second reading, Lachlan's mission fundamentally concerns two white men using Indigenous knowledge, bestowed upon Gemmy in trust, to retrieve the dead body of another white man.[67] While the narrative framing suggests that this endeavour might symbolise reconciliatory possibilities between white Australia and Traditional Owners of the land, Gemmy cannot stand in for an Indigenous character in this way. He is a white British man who has been shown kindness and acceptance by an Indigenous country, but this does not confer an Indigenous identity or heritage. The hope that it might is a form of erasure: Indigenous people exist and can represent themselves.[68] Likewise, the idea that Lachlan and Gemmy will be celebrated for their heroism

[67] Despite being raised in an unnamed Aboriginal tribe in the novel, Gemmy is white and British born.
[68] Crucially, this was true before "the middle of the nineteenth century," when *Remembering Babylon* is set (1). Key Indigenous figures of this time include Woollarawarre Bennelong, Wangal man from the Eora nation. His story, too, has been popularised and undoubtedly simplified in settler fiction. In "Writing Bennelong: The Cultural Impact of Early Australian Biofictions," Catherine Padmore and Kelly Gardiner conclude that even in these depictions "what these representations by white authors lack is a strong sense of the resistance, resilience, and continuity of Indigenous cultures in Australia" (445).

with a dedicated monument essentially reinforces the lost explorer legend and its inculcation of an everlasting white masculine presence in the desert.[69] While these interpretations are various, they all point to the fundamental failure of settler-colonial vision: of Leichhardt certainly, but also Lachlan and potentially White and Malouf, too.

Lachlan's attitude to exploration highlights, and perhaps unwittingly reproduces, the most sexist and racist tropes of settler-explorer mythology. For example, in Lachlan's imagining, white masculinity is both reverential and overriding. Leichhardt is "Dr. Leichhardt," and his two rescuers are Anglo-Saxon heroes. For Lachlan, the apex of such a mission is arguably his own ever-lasting presence in the landscape. Such enshrinement, however, will be shared with Gemmy, and both names "inscribed" on a monument erected in their honour (55). Lachlan's desire for permanence in the land recalls key critical approaches to the lost explorer legend. In a discussion of the many fictionalisations of Leichhardt's legend in *Writing the Colonial Adventure: Race, Gender and Nation in Anglo-Australian Popular Fiction, 1875-1914* (1995), Robert Dixon suggests that they serve the creation of settler identity and belonging in Australia. Each re-telling of Leichhardt's legend is a form of "racial and cultural generation," or an attempt to build upon "the unformed identity of white Australia" (66). In "Dead White Male Heroes: Ned Kelly and Ludwig Leichhardt in Australian Fictions" (2004), Susan Martin likewise addresses the colonising impetus of the Leichhardt legend. In *Voss*, the Leichhardt or explorer figure is sublimated into the landscape, and it is this very "disembodiment – uncertain traces, bodies of his companions, accounts of him, scattered over the desert like Voss's letters" that "makes him ineffaceable" ("Dead White Male Heroes" 27). But if Leichhardt is retrieved, perhaps he is no longer "ineffaceable"

[69] Susan Martin offers an extended reading of this trope in "Dead White Male Heroes: Ned Kelly and Ludwig Leichhardt in Australian Fictions," pp. 23-52.

(27). Lachlan's mission never materialises, however, and the explorer remains an ever-present colonial spectre.

The longstanding connection between exploration and settler identity is also reflected in Gemmy throughout *Remembering Babylon*. Stumbling out of the "Absolute dark" and onto the pastoral land of local settlers (2), Gemmy makes a wavering pronouncement: "'Do not shoot,' it shouted. 'I am a B-b-british object!'" (3). From the stuttering "b" through to the apparent misnomer of "object," Gemmy's plea stresses his perceived inhumanity and precarity on the Australian frontier. As Alice Brittan explains:

> The words in which Malouf's quasi-fictional Gemmy Fairley begs for clemency evoke the Australian convict argot of the period, but in their stuttered delivery they also capture the importance and the fragility of the relation between names and objects, in the Queensland of the mid-nineteenth-century frontier and the Queensland of the late twentieth century. (1159)

Gemmy's choice of words betrays his status as an ex-convict or an object of the British Crown, rather than as its subject or sovereign citizen. In this spoken designation, Gemmy first and foremost names himself as a passive object, unimportant and to be acted upon, rather than as an active agent or subject. The line recalls a similar passage from Ernest Favenc's *The Secret of the Australian Desert* (1895) in which one of Leichhardt's party is found. The man dies before being liberated, but not before shouting: "Yes, Englishman! White man!" (73). In this regard, both passages suggest the extent to which the trope of the lost explorer, or the lost white man in the Australian wilderness, relies on a racial hierarchy in which pronouncing whiteness becomes the only chance of survival.[2]

The combination of hindered settler vision and exploration of the land results in an orientation to Australian nature defined by the indistinct, liminal, and altogether dreamlike. In lieu of ancient ancestral connections, or a spiritual framework anchored in the land, settlers

are left with ideations, not unlike White's "country of the mind" (*Voss* 373). Driven by "a vision or hope for the future" in which they might reach some profound affinity with the land, the settler instead finds "a series of images, thoughts, and emotions, often with a story-like quality, generated by mental activity during sleep; the state in which this occurs" ("Dream" *OED*). While White believed that the settler could effectively wake up from this dream by embracing imaginative vision and possession of the land, Malouf seems less certain. Although there is expansion and possibility in such indeterminacy, for Malouf it is also limiting. That is, in place of a landscape of certainty, Malouf depicts an all-powerful and ancient land that is at times unknown, even unknowable, to settlers. For the author, this uncertainty is arguably part of the fabric of authentic settler relations to place. As Nettelbeck underscores, "colonial patriarchy's tradition of claiming space, and thereby the conditions of knowledge, is made questionable by a perpetual evasion of resolution" ("The Narration of Space" 107). Certainly, colonialism or patriarchy are never reproduced unquestioningly in Malouf, but they are rarely deconstructed, either.

In highlighting the limits of settler vision and exploration, however, Malouf also creates an "immersion narrative" (Leane "Tracking Our Country in Settler Literature" 11). Here, the settler might, through being in the natural world and living alongside its Traditional Owners, become one with the land. The indeterminacy or ambiguity of an imaginative connection to the land is also, paradoxically, part of what ensures the legitimacy of settler belonging and insulates it from critique. In "Tracking our Country in Settler Literature" (2014), Leane outlines the process in which these prevalent settler narratives use an Indigenous presence to facilitate belonging:

> the Aboriginal characters are all full-bloods and these representations present Aboriginal country and characters as sites of "knowing" the self and belonging, by taking the reader back to an imagined past in order to belong or somehow settle in the

> present. And, in the reconstructed past and the representations of Aborigines there's a "foundation story" an Indigenisation story for settlers. (3)

Drawing a connection to White's *A Fringe of Leaves* (1976), Leane describes *Remembering Babylon* as suggesting:

> a significant shift in settler conscious in the post-Mabo climate. He poses the question through Gemmy as to whether being Indigenous is a matter of blood or something that can be aspired to and achieved through immersion, respect and empathy with the original inhabitants and their descendants. This story legitimises a "divine purpose" for settlers. (12)

For White and Malouf, the "divine purpose" of the settler is to plumb the fall between language and land that arrival upon foreign shores demanded,[70] creating a narrative form that offers the possibility of an "Indigenisation" process for the settler (3).

White and Malouf share a common blind spot: both authors are anchored in providing a "human," equalising vision of nature's power, but in doing so often overlook the narrow margins of their own human experience. In "The Careful Surveyor," Malouf describes this process of accord between the individual and their surrounding environment as "that great soul-drama that is played out between the Nature we have been set down in and our own human nature" ("The Careful Surveyor" 111). Malouf has been explicit, too, about his belief that the artist's role is to "entice the imagination to 'settle'. By establishing a continuity of feeling between the present (and with it many provisional and possible futures) and a multiple

[70] In an interview with Paul Kavanagh in 1986, Malouf underlined his interest in the gulf between language and landscape in the Antipodes. He asserted: "If there is anything like the fall, that I might believe in, it is that fall which is peculiar to Australia, in which the landscape and the language are not one" (252). The Fall, in Western mythology a highly religious notion, is here a local and secular idea. No longer is the Fall denoting the movement of humankind away from innocence. Instead, the crucial fall is of language, a gap between the environment and the words we have to describe it, which Malouf will set out to overcome. Prior to Malouf' fiction, few characters capture this predicament more than the artist-explorers of White's oeuvre. Whether in the deafening silence of the bush as axe hits solitary stump, a poet grappling to find the words for a desert vista, or an artist's struggle to commit the infinite to canvas, many of White's characters stumble when trying to bridge this gap between language and environment.

but coherent past" ("'The Careful Surveyor'"111). This process of imaginative settlement, however, hinges on subordinating Indigenous characters to the full and spiritual development of other, usually white, protagonists. The fiction of White and Malouf often performs the imaginative work of settlement, or of settling the English or European imagination in an unknown land.

The metaphysical impetus that Malouf delineates for settlers—"to finally settle the place … in an interior way, spiritual and symbolic"—reveals an unyielding Western bias (Malouf qtd. in Levasseur et al., 172). The end of *Remembering Babylon*, for example, offers hope for reconciliation between settlers, the land, and its Traditional Owners. In the final line of *Remembering Babylon*, the fiery, Promethean imagery of "spark of life" and "crow" from its opening returns, and "all the muddy margin of the bay is alive, and in a line of running fire all the outline of the vast continent appears, in touch now with its other life" (182). The line suggests that a degree of reconciliation has taken place between the "outline of the vast continent" and "its other life." Here, "its other life" refers to the various kinds of "Other" that settlers dwelling at the edges of the continent may face; namely, the vast interior landscape—"Absolute Dark"—and its associated Indigenous owners (2). This is undoubtedly a soothing dream or aspiration for the settler, but the impulse to reconcile poetically, rather than through ceding sovereignty to Traditional Owners or enacting treaties or reparations, is a famously settler-authored ambition. Malouf is as assuredly writing within his remit as a creative writer, but these ambitions are also stories of the state, and the problem of Western universalism arises when they are reproduced without interrogation.

The conclusion of *Remembering Babylon* also alludes to an authorial motivation Malouf himself discerns in Bruce Chatwin's *Songlines*—namely, that the text is not so much about Indigeneity or settler relationships, but "how we might redefine the nature of man and save ourselves from extinction" ("Born to be Nomads: Bruce Chatwin's case for wandering

and living together" 39). *Remembering Babylon*, however, is not about broad ideas of "man" at all—it is a novel largely about white men. As Malouf notes in an interview with Brigid Rooney, even Gemmy the "black white" man represents white consciousness (54):

> When I wrote the book I was fairly clear in my own mind that I couldn't and wouldn't want to claim to be able to enter into the consciousness of an Aboriginal person, so I chose very deliberately, maybe too cleverly – but it was there already, I wasn't making it up – a character who was seen as Aboriginal, but was not. It was that business of seeing that was important to me. It seemed like something I could deal with, because it was in the minds of the white settlers. ("Interview with David Malouf" 90)

As Malouf asserts, and as we have seen, he is most interested in "that business of seeing" (90). He has, however, ironically failed to see that he reproduces many of the forms of settler blindness he criticises. In this regard, perhaps the most interesting questions posed by *Remembering Babylon* concern settler-colonial society and its chequered history of countenancing the unknown and unfamiliar—a history in which the novel is at times implicated.

While the settler community fails to embrace a spirit of reconciliation, and Gemmy consequently retreats to the wilderness and possibly dies, perception and imagination are highlighted for their regenerative potential. As Bridget Grogan asserts in "The Ayers Rock Experience: Reading to Recuperate the Lost in David Malouf's 'Mrs Porter and the Rock'" (2011), the spirit of Malouf's fiction so often facilitates an "imaginative engagement that expands the limits of the socialised self" (81). Like White, Malouf considers "imagination" to be a creative force: "a sense that what is at work in the writing, in the characters, in the world the book brings into existence, is imagination, a force that creates rather than argues and illustrates" ("Born to be nomads" 39). *Remembering Babylon* is an attempt at imagining another world—to see beyond the constraints of the binary between the land as either Babylon

or Jerusalem—but imagination has cultural and political limits that have nothing to do with whether a novel is "too cleverly" designed (qtd. In Rooney, "Interview with David Malouf" 90). In *Remembering Babylon*, an author of significant intellectual and creative powers meets the limits of imagination—a process both thematised and reproduced in his fiction. Malouf's stumbling here is not personal, but part of the Western tradition that has often failed to appreciate the culturally circumscribed remit of its own imaginings.

The Valley of Lagoons: Ambivalence and Survival

One of the major themes in Malouf's fiction is the growth of individual consciousness and its evolving interaction with nature, a venerable Western concern. As Abrams argues in *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (1971), these Western preoccupations originate from Christian eschatology and Augustine-inspired confessional writing. Paradise, salvation, and an apocalyptic end of days are recurring tropes of this Western tradition, with the individual often moving from a state of relative innocence, through experience (that may involve personal erring or a period of spiritual decline), towards a state of higher innocence. So seen, the fall, as severance or expulsion, ultimately results in higher awareness and privileged insights, attributable to a benign deity or spiritual presence operating within terrestrial and celestial realms. These traditions, as Abrams reveals in detail, are central themes of Romantic literature, and are especially prominent in the works of Blake and Wordsworth, authors well-known to Malouf, who is himself established as a considerable poet as well as a major novelist.

The Romantic vision is often expressed in terms of voyaging on strange, fabulous seas, or exploring "a terra incognita" in the individual mind—metaphors of specific relevance to *australis incognita* and not lost on Malouf (Abrams 25). Of special relevance to Malouf's fiction is what Abrams refers to as "the theodicy of the private life" in its more mundane

manifestations (95). As a late twentieth century writer, Malouf does not, as Milton did, need to "justify the ways of God to men" or show the spiritual trials of humankind's progenitors leading ultimately to salvation (*Paradise Lost*, 1, 1-26). Instead, in Malouf the Christian trajectory of trying "conversion and redemption" is recast in secular terms as "a painful process of self-formation, crisis, and self-recognition, which culminates in a stage of self-coherence, self-awareness, and assured power that is its own reward" (*Abrams* 96). This, with minor alterations and adjustments, is the recurring paradigm of Malouf's fiction, but it is one that is problematised by the author's introduction of Indigenous characters.

Like Malouf's first novel *Johnno* (1975), "The Valley of Lagoons" (2006) centres on a young male protagonist, the boundary between civilisation and wilderness, and the search for the self. But the similarities end there. At each point where Johnno failed, Angus succeeds. From exploration and perception through to the natural world, imagination, and Indigenous-settler relationships, "The Valley of Lagoons" realises Malouf's expansion of "the limit of the socialised self" (Grogan, "The Ayers Rock Experience: Reading to Recuperate the Lost in David Malouf's 'Mrs Porter and the Rock'" 81). While Johnno eventually retreats from Western civilisation, in "The Valley of Lagoons" Angus receives profound insight during an expedition into the natural world—and crucially, he survives it. Published over thirty years after *Johnno* (1975) and ten years after *Remembering Babylon* (1993), the divergence of "The Valley of Lagoons" on these central themes nonetheless suggests changes surpassing the passage of time. This work reflects a wider trend in Malouf's fiction towards successful "self-formation" in Australian nature (Abrams 96).

First published in the collection of short stories *Every Move you Make,* "The Valley of Lagoons" (2006) revolves around a pig hunt—certainly a unique kind of exploratory endeavour but nonetheless marked by familiar tropes of masculinity and discovery. The protagonist Angus and his family live on the periphery of the settler community,

differentiated by the father's legal profession (in a predominantly agricultural town) and other small "defiance[s] of local custom" (11). Malouf depicts a relatively progressive, urban family living in a semi-rural Australian community. Angus is a bookish youth of about sixteen who longs for the day his father permits his participation in a pig hunt. Once Angus is granted this experience by his father, he arguably owes subsequent revelations in nature to an Indigenous authority. The pig hunt itself enters the heart of The Valley of Lagoons in Far North Queensland, but the venture transcends mere geography and the hunting group inhabit a realm of silent legacies, cultural complexities, and imaginative possibilities.

Malouf's move towards living revelation and self-possession in a new land mirrors the development of White's own ideas of reconciliation and understanding. Like Malouf, White's later works more readily met the terms of a culture "possessed of understanding" than his foundational texts ("The Prodigal Son" 17). In particular, Brady argued that in *A Fringe of Leaves* (1976), White "at last got right the terms in which 'the people of a barely inhabited country [may] become a race possessed of understanding'" ("*A Fringe of Leaves*: Civilization by the Skin of Our Own Teeth" 124). In contrast to the death, persecution, and alienation that characterises the experiences of the visionaries in *Voss* (1957), *The Aunt's Story* (1948), and *Riders in the Chariot* (1961), Brady suggests that Ellen Roxburgh:

> is exposed to the land and its inhabitants and realises fully what is in herself. Instead of destroying her, as it does Voss, or alienating her from others as it does the *Riders in the Chariot*, this realization on the contrary enables her for life in society. (126)

Unlike many of White's protagonists, in *A Fringe of Leaves* (1976) Ellen need not die or transcend the material plane to increase her understanding of Australia or her place within it. Instead, her suffering provides the opportunity for an expansion of life in the world. In the transformation of suffering into the possibility of spiritual and social expansion, Brady likens Ellen to Laura, whose "triumph" is one of "self-possession" (130). Rather than obliterate the

self, Ellen learns to inhabit it. Across his fiction, White moves towards characters who survive transformation, as does Malouf. Malouf's early characters, like Johnno and even Ovid, also falter at self-recognition, never able to enjoy the enduring fruits of "an assured power that is its own reward" (Abrams 96). Like Ellen, however, the protagonist of "The Valley of Lagoons" survives an encounter with Australian nature.

The cost of this survival is key: an Indigenous character is used as a supporting instrument for settler spiritual or metaphysical metamorphosis. Like *Remembering Babylon* and White's *A Fringe of Leaves*, "The Valley of Lagoons" contains an Indigenous character whose presence facilitates settler transformation. This process is a hallmark of Western literature, and dates at least to the tradition of the noble savage trope, of whom the Romantic forebears of White and Malouf were intimately familiar. In *Finding Eliza: Power and Colonial Storytelling*, Larissa Behrendt describes the popularity of the figure in Australian literature, notably in White's *A Fringe of Leaves*, and its link to a European heritage:

> But contemporary fascination with Aboriginal culture – and a sympathy for Aboriginal people – has led not only to an interest in but also a romanticism of Aboriginal culture, as well as a reverence for the ideal of the noble savage, which portrays Aboriginal people as mythical, super-wise, super-human figures. The noble savage is, of course, not a recent invention. The concept is often associated with Jean-Jacques Rousseau … (144)

As Behrendt notes, Rousseau's association with the noble savage myth is perhaps qualified even though he never used the term. Rousseau's ideas of nature and society in the eighteenth century were influential, especially in successive Romantic writers, and much of his writing enforced distinctions between supposedly former, wild states of humanity and current, largely European, civil states. Western civilisation, for Rousseau, has stripped the individual "of some advantages which he got from nature" but granted him refined "faculties" (195). Despite

Rousseau never using the term "noble savage," the emergence of the idea is speedily contextualised by his writings.[71] Herein, Indigenous peoples and histories are essentially equated with a prelapsarian innocence, arguably betraying the West's wondrous ignorance of the lives or histories of other cultures. As Christopher Wraight argues, the idea "that there was ever a historical period in which environmental or psychological pressures didn't force people to band together in hierarchies, or raid one another's living spaces, or enter some kind of formal trading arrangement" is simply "fanciful" (13-14).

In an Australian context, these topos are brought together in what is often termed "white indigenisation" narratives. Here, the settler, through communion with nature and Indigenous custodians of the land, reaches some higher order of being and belonging. In "Tracking Our Country in Settler Literature," Jeanine Leane describes the narrative arc of White's *A Fringe of Leaves* (1976), which reverberates throughout Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* and "The Valley of Lagoons":

> [T]he reader follows Ellen on a journey, presumably to belong and to understand the other: the Aborigine. But this raises further important questions. Whose quest? What quest? Who feels like they do not belong? *Fringe* deals with states of mind, and more specifically for me, shifting states of mind; it offers a new way of claiming Country, as do the Malouf and the Grenville texts. So now I am tracking these writers into headspaces; while Prichard and Herbert dealt with literal frontiers these authors are moving into frontiers of the mind. (9)

The profound and vital journey White initiates into "the country of the mind" has a counterpart: for all its celebration of visionary powers, the natural world, and imagination,

[71] In *The Social Contract* (1762), Jean-Jacques Rousseau proposes that in "civil society," the individual "surrenders some of the advantages that belong to the state of nature" but "gains in return far greater ones; his faculties are so exercised and developed, his mind is so enlarged, his sentiments so ennobled, and his whole spirit so elevated that, if the abuse of his new condition did not in many cases lower him to something worse than what he had left, he should constantly bless the happy hour that lifted him for ever from the state of nature and from a stupid, limited animal made a creature of intelligence and a man" (64-65).

White's landscape legacy is an actively colonial one" (*Voss* 373). The literary quest aligns with a white settler quest to claim the countryside that resists physical claim, such as the desert, through imaginative and narrative means.

Several critics have acknowledged that Malouf's "The Valley of Lagoons" suggests a potential path for the settler to experience both revelation and self-formation in the landscape. For example, an early review in *The Observer* notes its focus on "the force of the natural world … at its most powerful" and suggests that "Malouf's characters reach towards a notion of selfhood that, more often than not, proves elusive" (26). In a review for *Antipodes*, Nicholas Dunlop offered a more detailed analysis, linking the epigraph of *Every Move you Make* from Pascal's *Pensees* to Malouf's characters more generally. Their "quest for … self-awareness," he contends, finds form in "moments of epiphany and transformation" that "dominate the emotional landscape, a landscape that is itself silhouetted against the minutely observed topography of Australia" (87). Dunlop then introduces "The Valley of Lagoons" and suggests that it "carries echoes of *Remembering Babylon* in its depiction of an adolescent boy undergoing a kind of initiation into nature on a rite-of-passage hunting trip in the Outback" (87). While many critics identify rites-of-passage and the natural world as central to the story, in Dunlop's reference to *Remembering Babylon* he alludes to a neglected aspect of "The Valley of Lagoons" that complicates this process of self-formation—Indigenous sovereignty and the self-recognition of the Australian settler.

In "The Exotic at Home," an essay by Malouf published in *Griffith Review* (2006), the author describes the profound impact the Valley of Lagoons had on him as a young man in 1955 and his search for a suitable form to capture the experience. Malouf's vision is a bucolic idyll and so searingly otherworldly that his initial failures to adequately represent it seem understandable, even expected. He recalls "paradisiacal light at all times of day," "great flocks of birds," "a kind of primeval garden," and "an early vision of nature untouched" ("The

Exotic at Home"). Edenic in its visage and perhaps even spiritual in its offerings, the Valley is as Malouf describes "a great green place that existed entirely without man but did not resist his appearance, and was neither hostile nor predatory" ("The Exotic at Home"). Removed from the dreary dun-coloured deserts that populated various cultural forms at the time, the Valley of Lagoons "was not a desert but a vast water park crowded with creatures" ("The Exotic at Home"). These memories and visions stayed with Malouf

> for years afterwards. I could summon them up at will, and knew always that I would write something one day that would owe its existence to them and would try to give that existence back. When I returned to Brisbane I tried to catch the place in poems. It would not be caught. ("The Exotic at Home")

His majestic experience of the land resisted the totalising effect of language. Not until decades later would the Valley of Lagoons find its way into his writing, after a wave of inspiration "suddenly swarmed about me" and "the thing I wanted to write, and had always meant to write, was there complete. I had only to enter the landscape and let it occur" ("The Exotic at Home"). Immersion in the landscape is here a formative part of the authorial process as well as a key theme.

The Valley of Lagoons exists in at least two ways in the cultural imaginary: as an Indigenous homeland and site of historical settler significance. Malouf incorporates these potentially incommensurate relationships in his story. The Valley of Lagoons is the name of a real location in the Upper Burdekin region of North Queensland, and its history is relevant for at least three reasons. Firstly, it is the traditional land of the Gugu Badhun people, to whom native title was granted in 2012. Secondly, it has a significant place in colonial-explorer history as a "picturesque" but also agriculturally viable tract of land. Finally, the beauty of the region had a profound effect on Malouf when he visited as a 21-year-old man on a shooting trip ("The Exotic at Home"). Uniting these different perspectives, Malouf introduces a diverse

group of young settler men on a hunting trip in a land of almost Edenic resonance and questions how a Romantic process of self-formation can occur in a land that does not belong to you, and whose beauty conceals a history of violent displacement. From the outset of "The Valley of Lagoons," Angus is drawn to the region by "the magic of its name" (7) but concedes that it existed "only in our heads. It had a history, but only in the telling" (8). While this is true of Angus and the local settlers, it is not true for all men on the hunting trip, or indeed the surrounding township.

"The Valley of Lagoons" contains one of Malouf's most compelling Indigenous characters, Matt Riley, but there is no explicit mention of his Indigeneity in the story itself. Several points in the text substantiate this claim. The first is a reference to the ancestral lineage of the hunting ground and its relationship to Riley's authority:

> The land out here was Matt's grandmother's country, and the moment he entered it he had a different status: that was the accepted but unspoken ground of his authority. That and the knowledge of the place and all its workings that came with the land itself. (30)

A page later, the narrator adds:

> "His grandmother's country" was a phrase that referred, without raising too precisely the question of blood, to the relationship a man might stand in to a particular tract of land, that went deeper and further back than legal possession. When used in town it had "implications," easy to pick up but not to be articulated. A nod to the knowing. (31)

The changing status of Riley from softly spoken husband to commanding leader accords with this shift from settler community to countryside, suggesting that his authority is contextual. For example, we are told: "Wes McGowan, whose party this was, had ceded authority for the moment" (24-25). But this command is only "ceded" to him when they step into the Valley,

and it occurs "with no need to explanation" (31). Malouf's language here suggests that Riley holds a pre-existing sovereignty that is *a priori* on the land but revoked outside it.

The final point in the text implying Riley's Indigenous heritage relates to his relationship with the Valley. Alongside his authority becoming "actual" on the land, he also reconnects with a part of himself, receiving direct knowledge of the land and his ancestral dominion over it:

> Out here, in the country itself, though what it referred to was still discreetly unspecified, it was actual. From the moment we climbed down out of the trucks and let the light of its broken waters enter us, and breathed in its sweetish water-smelling air, and took its dampness on our skins—from that moment something was added to Matt Riley, or given back; and he took it, with no sign of change … (31)

This is a portrait of power, unnamed and unceded, but nevertheless real. For Riley, at least from the perspective of Angus, this emplacement also recalls a deep history in the land: "He had re-entered a part of himself that was continuous with the place, and with a history the rest of us had forgotten or never known" (31). Though narrated and necessarily inflected by Angus, the passage nevertheless suggests both the spiritual dimension of Riley's relationship with place and, by way of contrast, the limits of the settler experience in Australian nature.

The narration of Riley's experiences through Angus also reveals the boundaries of settler-colonial understanding, both through the character and potentially in the narration itself. When Riley crouches down in the countryside, attending to the earth and offering instruction to Angus, his perception is described as "visionary guesswork" (32), and his language comes in a "grunting monosyllabic style" (31-2). The notion that millions of years of cultural evolution is "visionary guesswork" (32) or that Riley's spare language constitutes "grunting" (31) is problematic and it undoubtedly represents a pervasive settler belief system. Riley's taciturn language recalls Jeanine Leane's description of White's *A Fringe of Leaves*

and Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* as notable for their silent Indigenous characters. As Leane notes, there are, however, "sounds—mainly inscribed in the language of savagery" ("Tracking Our Country in Settler Literature" 8). The term "guesswork," however, appears almost verbatim in *Remembering Babylon* to describe a settler understanding of place—Frazer's attempts to apprehend the land are "mere guesswork" (17) rather than "visionary guesswork" (32). In this repetition, "guesswork" may describe the natural process of learning to understand a place. After all, Malouf describes Riley's estimations as "visionary" ("The Valley of Lagoons" 29), while settler guesswork is "mere" conjecture (17). But these passages also squarely align Riley with the trope of the noble savage, and his rhetorical purpose in the text is facilitating the process of settler-belonging.

Links between First Nations people and settler transformations in nature reveal some of the enduring problems with both Australian landscape literature and some of the ecocritical approaches it inspires. In narratives about the local environment and its gifts, white Australian authors routinely rely on Indigenous characters either to educate and enlighten settlers or sanction their existence on invaded lands. Such moves towards a supposedly reconciliatory framework are narrative devices designed to serve settler nationhood. This motif is sometimes obfuscated in both the fiction itself and in the secondary literature, perhaps especially in ecocritical approaches that attempt to adopt a "neutral" material lens. Such neutrality does not exist. The passivity that characterises the noble savage, and which Riley evokes, is a bedrock of colonial storytelling. As Larissa Behrendt argues, "Aboriginal people have been strongly engaged in political activism, far from happy and passive about their treatment at the hands of the colonisers" (147). Malouf's Indigenous characters, typically set within compelling and even beautiful prose, often misrepresent many of the realities of Indigenous life.

The correlation between Indigenous characterisation and primitivism is also apparent in Malouf's narration of his own creative process. Here, he describes the formative process in

Valley of Lagoons that precipitated the story, detailing his impressions of "a kind of primeval garden" and "a great green place that existed entirely without man but did not resist his appearance" ("The Exotic at Home"). Placing an Indigenous character in this setting recalls a common practice of settler literatures: the evocation of "the 'ancient culture', an Aborigine who lives in the past. The primitive state they remain in makes them a subject of curiosity" (Behrendt 145). Despite these significant limitations, Matt Riley is one of the most sensitive and affecting portrayals of an Indigenous character by a settler-Australian author, and this success turns on the fact that so little is said about his Indigenous heritage. When even one of Australia's most gifted and erudite writers succeeds—by comparative measure—in Indigenous characterisation precisely through omission, the failures of settled Australia to engage with, must less understand, its First Nations is highlighted.

For Angus, the journey into "The Valley of Lagoons" is foremost an avenue for self-formation, but his immersion in the natural world is constrained. The "spirit of place," which Bruce Bennett describes as characteristic of Australian short fiction, arguably arrives through another character ("Short Fiction and the Canon: Australia and Canada" 109). Angus' experience is receptive, while Riley's is active and grounded in continuous attachment to the place. Under Riley's helm, the protagonist becomes reacquainted with a way of being in the world: "As I walked on into this bit of grey-green nondescript wilderness I was happily at home in myself. But in my old self, not a new one" (38). While the Valley is "given back" to Riley, Angus can only rediscover parts of himself within it. Echoing Gemmy's final retreat into the land, Angus recalls that "it was myself I was moving into" and "there could be no final leaving" (44). But Angus does leave. And in this regard, the romantic and recurrent paradigm in Malouf's fiction is also a limit—the settler journey towards discovery of the self in nature ultimately must take place within the mind, the only real and abiding "terra incognita" or place of "no final leaving" (44).

Settler ownership and belonging is confined to a conceptual realm, meaningfully taking place only in the mind. The epigraph to *Every Move You Make*, from Pascal's *Pensees*, asks: "Who set me here? By whose order and under what guiding destiny was this time, this place assigned to me?" "The Valley of Lagoons" leads with this broad metaphysical question and offers Australian particularities that problematise it. For the later Malouf, given that self-recognition is central to becoming, the realisation that settlers have been set here erroneously in land assigned illegally is part of any survivable process of self-formation. But it is nonetheless a survival that hinges on an elegant, although troubling, appropriation of Indigenous connections to place. "The Valley of Lagoons" ends with Angus declaring that "This was the country I would go on dreaming in, wherever I lay my head" (45). A sense of hope and connection to the natural world is palpable here, but both rely on Angus's state of mind—his so-called "dreaming" (45). Malouf's conclusion also alludes to a distinction between Dreaming and "dreaming." This is one of the significant limits on both settler and secular relationships with the land—in place of a spiritual experience, the connection is relegated to an idea, aesthetic, or preoccupation. Alongside the possibilities of imaginative connections to the land and expansive perception, "The Valley of Lagoons" suggests Malouf's awareness of the limits of such ideation.

Imagination is central to the fictional landscapes of Patrick White and David Malouf. In the realm of imagination, possibilities for settler connection and belonging to the Australian environment are endless. In some ways, this expansive potential is also the limit of settler representations of the land. After all, imaginative possession of the land is potentially as shallow as it is all-encompassing—an idea that, even in its occasional entertainment, firmly distinguishes Malouf from White. Between White's award of the Nobel Prize in 1973, the publication of Malouf's *Johnno* in 1975, and "Valley of Lagoons" in 2006, sweeping cultural changes took place in Australia, including the abolition of the White Australia policy and the

inauguration of Native Title claims. Perhaps on account of these changes, Malouf's fiction increasingly engages with the limits of settler conceptions of antipodean land. Imagination moves from an all-expansive realm of possibility in White to one that is attenuated by the very imprecision enabling its capaciousness. Yet, Malouf's fiction sometimes fails to acknowledge that these limits of settler vision are also his limits. The confines of this tradition, including White, Malouf, and their forebears in the Romantic tradition, become especially prominent when compared to the landscapes of another lauded figure of Australian literature: Alexis Wright. Wright is at once a deeply local and deeply planetary writer. Her influences include the oral storytelling tradition of her Waanyi ancestors in the Gulf of Carpentaria through to the decadent French poet Charles Baudelaire (Wright, "A Self-Governing Literature" 92). At the very least, and as we shall see, through the lens of Wright's fiction, what appears to be an "Australian" tradition in White and Malouf is revealed as a relatively narrow and Western one.

Coda: Malouf and Indigenous Landscapes

At the bicentenary in 1988,[72] David Malouf proposed that Australia is home to at least two distinct landscape traditions. First, "the Western tradition of landscape thinking" and second, an "Indigenous tradition that reaches back millennia" ("Second Nature" 85). In brief, he suggests that "the land had received the imprint of culture long before we came to it" ("Landscapes" 141-143). Of course, so-called settlement posed a far greater problem for the Traditional Owners than their prospective usurpers. While this is a truism, Malouf introduces a less commonly discussed detail of invasion: the challenges to Australia's First Nations were imaginative as well as physical. Malouf makes the crucial point that modern Indigenous

[72] Marking 200 years since the arrival of the First Fleet in Australia in 1788.

authors often "re-imagine, but that this builds on a significant and demonstrated pre-existing 'capacity'" ("Landscapes" 59). He explains:

> This capacity to re-imagine things, to take in and adapt, might be something we should learn from, something that comes closer than a nostalgia for lost unity to the way the world actually is, and also to the way it works. It might remind us as well of something we need to keep in mind: which is the extent to which Aboriginal notions of inclusiveness, of re-imagining the world to take in all that is now in it, has worked to include *us*. ("Landscapes" 59)

Such cognitive flexibility and imaginative generosity, Malouf submits, is something Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations have afforded settlers since British arrival. Using Bennelong as a key example,[73] Malouf elaborates on the gulf between the imaginative demands of colonisation for settler and Indigenous people: "Bennelong may have made a larger leap in incorporating Philip into his world … than the Governor or any of his officers had to make to find a place for him" ("Landscapes" 59-60). While Phillip and other colonists had come here "expecting to find natives," Bennelong "had no preparation for it but his own capacity to observe, open his imagination, and respond" ("Landscapes" 60). Despite this comparative lack of time or precedent, Bennelong made room "in his world for Phillip's authority" ("Landscapes" 60) and had "behind him the strength of a culture that in being old had developed, in its long view of things an extraordinary capacity to accept change and take in what was new and must be adapted to" (60). Malouf's declaration ends with the suggestion that Bennelong is "an example to each one of us, and, considering all that followed, a shame to each one of us as well"—us, of course, being settler Australians (60).

[73] The figure of Bennelong and his reception is far more complicated than Malouf's snapshot suggests, and he may well represent quite a different legacy to many First Nations people. There is a case to be made that Bennelong is a celebrated figure for settlers precisely because of his acceptance of invasion, or even complicity, and in many settler readings he becomes a figure of the noble savage par excellence.

Although landscape is often regarded as a decidedly Anglo-European phenomenon, accounts of its centrality to Chinese and Indigenous painting traditions suggest this idea as being underlain with Western biases. As WJT Mitchell observes in *Landscape and Power* (1994):

> at a minimum we need to explore the possibility that the representation of landscape is not only a matter of internal politics and national or class ideology but also an international, global phenomenon, intimately bound up with the discourses of imperialism. (9)

The powers typically associated with strong landscape painting traditions—"China, Japan, Rome, seventeenth century Holland and France, eighteenth and nineteenth century Britain"—also have a pronounced colonial record (9). In this regard, and as Mitchell concludes, "landscape is a medium in the fullest sense of the word" (14). It is necessarily representational—or as Malouf describes it, a "Second Nature."

Yet when colonists encountered unknown landscapes, they were routinely mistaken for uninhabited, unmodified wildernesses. For example, despite evidence that the environment was already mediated in Australia, early settlers celebrated apparently spontaneous pockets of "civilized" nature. Bruce Pascoe and Bill Gammage provide many accounts of early settlers and explorers remarking upon inexplicably cultivated tracts of the Australian environment. The seismic shift in settler understanding of Indigenous agriculture, prompted in part by Gammage's *The Biggest Estate on Earth* (2011), was cemented with the publication of the Aboriginal writer Bruce Pascoe's *Dark Emu* (2013). Pascoe, a descendent of Yuin, Bunurong, and Palawa peoples, concludes *Dark Emu* with a bold outline of the consequences of ongoing cultural misunderstanding and misrepresentation in Australia: "To deny Aboriginal agricultural and spiritual achievement is the single greatest impediment to inter-cultural understanding and, perhaps, Australian moral and economic prosperity" (156).

The once-established idea that the Traditional Owners of the land were a hunter-gatherer society is being brought into contention.[74] Primary document upon primary document attest to Gammage's claim of the "constant and purposeful" management of land prior to colonisation (17). In place of fences, "grass templates" divided land, while "plant environments in 1788" were altered by "cultivation and selective burning" (299). In monsoonal regions like Carpentaria, water lilies were relocated, though only "within the same clan area" (294), and storing food was practised, partly for ceremonial purposes (296). An intricately woven network of ritual, agriculture, encampment, and mobility facilitated a decidedly different kind of land management to Western cultures, but it was nonetheless management. The land that greeted colonial-settlers reflected millennia of Indigenous cultural practices and customs. It was already a landscape.

[74] There are many nuanced opinions on this argument in the secondary literature. Keen, for example, interrogates the "evaluative judgement" in Pascoe's description of "'mere hunter-gatherers' and the assumption that hunting and gathering is both simple and primitive. It is not clear who has promoted a view of a 'primitive hunter-gatherer lifestyle' in Australia. Is Pascoe referring to lay opinion, anthropological or historical accounts? Sutton and Walshe (forthcoming: chapter 8) show that many well-informed publications and educational materials on pre-colonial Aboriginal economy and society have in fact been available to the Australian public for many decades" (107). Keen's questioning of the values behind the assumption that hunter-gatherer societies are primitive seems fair, although I do wonder if questioning Pascoe's language is somewhat disingenuous. It seems clear to me, in Pascoe's book, that the "mere" belongs to widespread Western cultural assumptions, which surely includes the equation of hunter-gatherer societies with primitivism.

Chapter 4: Misread Wastelands – The Desert and Dump in Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* and Patrick White's *Voss*

The desert and dump are recurrent tropes throughout Australian literature, often invoked in literary allusions to *Terra Australis* and its settler colonial history. While the desert has often emblematised the erroneous notion of the continent as an empty "terra nullius," the rubbish tip has typically symbolised the nation as a convict dumping ground overflowing with colonial and industrial detritus despoiling the land. These landscapes are testaments to the different ways Australian land has been conceived and represented. As well as offering up poetic encounters with the material land, literary portraits of the desert and the dump convey cultural judgements about value, including what societies choose to salvage and discard. By analysing depictions of the desert and the dump in the work of Patrick White and Alexis Wright, parallels between these authors are used to foreground troubled colonial lineages in the context of Australian literature.

Despite profound and obvious differences between Alexis Wright and Patrick White, their depictions of Australian land contain pronounced similarities that have prompted other institutions, writers, and scholars to link them. For instance, *Carpentaria* and *Voss* share the unique privilege of being the only Australian texts listed on the French *agrégation*.[75] The prominent Australian writer Christos Tsiolkas also made a connection between the two writers in his 2017 monograph *On Patrick White* when he remarked on the shared "mythological grandeur" (24) of Wright's and White's landscapes (24).[76] In addition to their

[75] Carpentaria and Voss were set texts on the French agrégation—a prestigious entry exam into the French civil service, typically featuring canonical authors—in 2021 and 1974 respectively.
[76] In addition, *The Vivisector* and *Carpentaria* were jointly discussed by book critic Geordie Williamson on the ABC radio program *The Bookshelf*, July 2, 2022. See: Williamson, Geordie. "The Book Club: Celebrating Australian Literature for the ABC's 90th." *The Bookshelf with Kate Evans and Cassie McCullagh*, ABC Radio, July 2, 2022, https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/the-bookshelf/book-club-alexis-wright-patrick-white-abc-90th/13951130.

mythopoeic terrains, Wright and White chronicle and represent the unique biodiversity of the Australian desert, as well as the special features of its dumping grounds. While the deserts of Wright's *Carpentaria* (2006) and Patrick White's *Voss* (1957) are not the same, the local particularities of Australia's interior are celebrated by each author as personal, planetary, material, aesthetic, and spiritual. Likewise, both Wright and White portray the dump through many shared motifs, but also as complex analogues of settler-colonial Australia. Focusing on Wright's *Carpentaria* and White's *Riders in the Chariot* (1961) and short story "Down at the Dump*"* (1964), the local dump is considered in terms of its cultural, national, and ecological reverberations. From unwanted inheritances, discarded objects, salvaged rubbish, and treasured figures laid to waste, their literary portraiture of the dump offers ample opportunities to explore the entangled issues of legacy, land, and colonialism. There is significant common ground in these author's environmental visions, but there is equal disjuncture, revealing profound differences in settler-colonial and Indigenous world views and thereby troubling any straightforward understanding of landscape and legacy.

On Comparison

Comparing the work of Patrick White and Alexis Wright is inherently risky. As Louise Loomes observes:

> Critics have at times solved the problem of not knowing what to make of *Carpentaria* by comparing it to the works of Australian predecessors, such as Frank Hardy, Patrick White and Xavier Herbert (Syson 85; Devlin-Glass 82). (124)

This comparative practice is often reductive, as Loomes notes. Alison Ravenscroft shares this viewpoint, suggesting that:

> White critical efforts to make meaning of Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* have sought to anchor it to the big names among white Australian novelists. Such moves presume to make Wright indebted to these literary masters, assessing the significance of her text by its proximity to theirs. Frank Hardy's name is frequently evoked and so is Patrick White's … (195)

Ravenscroft captures a reflex among settler scholars that is hard to dispute. Perhaps confounded by *Carpentaria*'s "refusal to conform to the very colonial and capitalist notions of linear progress" that underwrite the settler project (Rowland 542), settler readers often make sense of Wright's novels by situating their analysis in familiar Western frameworks, such as through comparison to white "literary masters" (Ravenscroft 19). Jeanine Leane suggests related shortfalls in the scholarship on Wright, especially regarding the classification of *Carpentaria* as "magical realism" ("Historyless people" 154). As Leane asserts, Wright in fact "reconfigures conventional meanings of time and timelessness in a story of Aboriginal realism" ("Historyless people" 161). Leane's criticism underlines the degree to which claims of "reality" and "realism" depend on ontological frameworks that typically privilege and reinforce settler-colonial perspectives.

Despite the commonplace practice that Ravenscroft rightly arraigns—in which it has become a critical reflex to compare Wright to White—the fact is that few (if any) scholars have robustly compared *Carpentaria* to any of Patrick White's novels.[77] Instead, existing comparisons between White and Wright are largely cursory and consequently more

[77] Indigenous scholars like Jeanine Leane and Larissa Behrendt comprehensively analyse Patrick White's work, especially *A Fringe of Leaves* (1976), in "White's Tribe: Patrick White's Representation of the Australian Aborigine in *A Fringe of Leaves*" (2014) and *Finding Eliza: Power and Colonial Storytelling* (2016) respectively.

diminishing of Wright's work. For example, Ian Syson's comparison to White in his review essay is scarcely rigorous. Of *Carpentaria*, Syson concludes:

> Is it a book that, despite what can be taken for flaws and impasses, ends up a pleasing and important document of our time? I just don't know. The fact that when reading I kept drawing comparisons with Patrick White's *Tree of Man*—especially in relation to the sense of satisfaction in having finished what felt like an Australian epic—leads me to believe the latter … perhaps. (8)

Such passing connections warrant criticism because they draw comparisons between *Carpentaria* and White's work, in this case *The Tree of Man* (1955), without directly attending to either text. This form of literary criticism, which includes a significant part of Australian review culture, is ethically and methodologically compromised.

Compared to White's work, parallels between *Carpentaria* and Xavier Herbert's *Capricornia* (1938) have been more extensive. Cornelius Martin Renes suggests Wright's novel "rewrites *Capricornia*'s narrative and agenda" (54) while acknowledging that Wright denies this influence (65). In contrast, Paul Sharrad notes a "significant difference" between Herbert and Wright insofar as "Herbert takes his mother tongue for granted: it is a vehicle for getting at social reality," while Wright "begins with the land and ends with it" (59). In terms of Patrick White, however, no substantive comparison to the work of Alexis Wright exists. By considering both authors' representations of the desert and dump, this chapter foregrounds issues of wastage and value in relation to the land and interrogates the idea that comparison must "presume to make Wright indebted" to White (Ravenscroft 195).

Nonetheless, readings of *Carpentaria* that preclude settler attempts to make meaning, or what Kate Rigby describes as a "negative hermeneutic," are hard to counter (124). But as Rigby observes, such arguments potentially limit the field of research and "decline the

invitation that [*Carpentaria*] extends to non-Waanyi readers" (Rigby 124). As Rigby outlines, in Wright's essay "On Writing *Carpentaria*" the author bids non-Waanyi readers to "believe in the energy of the Gulf country, to stay with a story as a welcomed stranger as if the land was telling a story about itself as much as the narrator is telling stories to the land" (Wright 87, Rigby 124). As Samuel Cox observes in "I'll Show You Love in a Handful of Dust: The Material Poetics of Voss" (2022), Patrick White's deep attention to the material poetics of the desert illuminates his own struggle to overcome inherited Eurocentric ways of seeing and writing the land. In his depiction of the desert, White's efforts to assign the land precedence are clear, as is his "battle to meld the predominantly European literary aesthetics and poetics he inherited to the dry and uniquely Australian material environment" (Cox). In this spirit, a comparative reading of Wright's and White's deserts and dumps highlights the work of both authors in recasting common notions of Australian nature, reveals the significance of the land itself, and clarifies the weaknesses of settler representations of the environment.

Alexis Wright is a Waanyi writer whose people have inhabited the continent for millennia, and whose engagement with the land therefore significantly predates White's. By placing Wright's *Carpentaria* (2006) over White's *Voss* (1957), *Riders in the Chariot* (1961), and "Down at the Dump" (1964), White's landscapes are refocused in ways that, I hope, both acknowledge the significance and vitality of Indigenous stories and afford unique insights into White's fictional terrains. I argue that reading White's landscapes after Wright contextualises White's legacy, offering pathways to reconsider the primacy of the land and its depiction in Australian literature.

In many ways, for both authors the land itself is paramount, guiding and influencing their writing, and they are in various ways *its* successor. The temptation here might be to bring the authors together under a vision of commonly celebrated and shared land, but I suspect that this instinct is deeply enculturated for the white settler. Eliding cultural difference

and focusing on universalising visions of nature presumes a common understanding of both the environment and humanity. While Alexis Wright and Patrick Wright both chronicle uneasy successions and difficult relations to the land, culture, and the past, Wright's invitation to the reader to be taken up by the land, rather than to take it up, reveals a stark difference between the two authors. By analysing these literary responses to notions such as wastage, detritus, and emptiness in relation to the land, nuanced understandings of Patrick White's landscape legacy, and what this legacy suggests about settler colonial and Indigenous perspectives, emerge. For all his attempts at creating an infinite, spiritual, and universal vision of humankind and its relationship to the natural world, White's landscapes are ultimately contained images of the settler-Australian nation.

The Desert

From the first European descriptions of Australia and throughout British settlement, the vast nullity of Australia's inland seemed unbreachable. Throughout settler Australian literature, the desert locale was predominantly a place of death, suffering, or—at best—unease. As Thomas Lynch observes in "Literature in the Arid Zone," early novels in the "station-wife" genre, such as the fiction of Myrtle Rose White, cast the desert "as a bleak place judged almost entirely on the basis of its suitability for pastoral success" (74). This tradition persisted throughout the twentieth century, continuing an approach to the land that is decidedly "non-ecological" ("Literature in the Arid Zone" 77).

For the most part, Australian poets continued this pattern of representing the desert as a hopeless void. AD Hope famously launched a scathing rebuke of the nation in his poem "Australia" (1939) that relied on an extended metaphor of the shallow aridity of the desert. The poem describes a landscape marred by "rivers of water" that "drown among inland sands." The jewel in the crown of the national landscape is a dead heart that captures the

vacuity of the local culture: an "Arabian desert of the human mind." Hope's "Australia" avowedly impugns the nation for its cerebral and cultural emptiness:

> And her five cities, like five teeming sores,
>
> Each drains her: a vast parasite robber-state
>
> Where second hand Europeans pullulate
>
> Timidly on the edge of alien shores. ("Australia" 42)

While the poet concedes that Australia, the "parasite robber-state," was constructed at the expense of the natural environment, Australia is not a triumphant victor. Fearful of an unknown interior, the sickly and multiplying colonial settlement clings to the edges of the continent. The rebuke and its prophetic hope that "from the deserts the prophets come" did not foretell any immediate changes in attitudes toward the Australian desert. In 1942, James McAuley wrote in "Envoi" of a "salty sunken desert" and "a futile heart" (*Collected Poems* 6). Before the publication of *Voss* (1957), in settler Australian prose or verse the desert overwhelmingly represented emptiness, death, and futility.

In stark contrast, an ecological reading of apparently barren land as a place of vitality and splendour connects Alexis Wright and Patrick White, alongside their assertion that the terrain is not—or not only—a wasteland. Moreover, for both authors the desert is central to their depiction of the human mind. Described as a "province" ("On Writing *Carpentaria*" 83) by Wright and as a "country" by White (*Voss* 373), the mind is foundationally linked to the local environment, notably its desertscapes. There are at least three key areas of confluence and difference in the deserts of *Carpentaria* and *Voss*: ecological diversity, cultural significance, and spiritual visions. Accordingly, in what follows I explore the ecological

diversity of Wright's and White's desert and their depiction of its cultural significance before proceeding to a discussion of the spiritual differences between these terrains.

In contrast to settler representations of desert aridity, Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* opens with a vision of dynamic desert environments. The dynamism of Wright's terrain is often conveyed through the climate of the Gulf country and its adjacent deserts. Subject to seasonal aridity and monsoons, dramatic weather events in Wright's country are often short-lived and briskly replaced by contrasting atmospheric conditions. The first chapter of *Carpentaria* introduces the countryside as delivering a "normal sort of dust storm thundering in from the south" (9) covering the town in a "thick wall of red dust" (9). The dust storm is soon succeeded by a "violent electrical storm" (9) that conclusively "ruined the day" (9). Throughout the novel, images of stagnation are swiftly followed by impressions of verdancy and change. For example, the opening "dust storm" in Chapter Five brings the "red-earth dust of the dry country" billowing out behind Mozzie Fishman's convoy of rusted sedans (119). This image is soon contrasted with a still and "pristine environment" (119). The "dry country" (119) re-emerges but is followed by a vision of "water birds of the Wet season's Gulf country lagoons flying overhead" (120). The landscapes of *Carpentaria* contain both aridity and monsoonal rains that bring "desert flowers" (141) and "the flooding desert waters" (461). With constellations of red dust, electrical storms, and deluges, Wright's Gulf country is a vital and resplendent site.

Despite their desert-like features, the landscapes of *Carpentaria* are characterised by burgeoning signs of life. This is apparent in the opening page of the novel:

> The ancestral serpent, a creature larger than storm clouds, came down from the stars, laden with its own creative enormity. It moved graciously – if you had been watching with the eyes of a bird hovering in the sky far above the ground. Looking down at the

> serpent's wet body, glistening from the ancient sunlight, long before man was a creature who could contemplate the next moment in time. It came down those billions of years ago, to crawl on its heavy belly, all around the wet clay soils in the Gulf of Carpentaria. (1)

In Wright's majestic and decidedly non-anthropocentric introduction to the land, its vitality and agency are clear. Even the dry and baked claypans "breathed like skin" (72), while lagoons overflow with "ten thousand fish" (122). There is nothing "dead" in this so-called "dead heart."

A similar inversion appears in Patrick White's *Voss* (1957), as common ideas of a barren and lifeless plain are transformed into a vibrant, detailed, and diverse desert ecology. *Voss*'s celebration of the desert includes his acknowledgement of its Indigenous owners. Yet his treatment of Aboriginal characters and use of creation stories have been deservedly criticised for relying on the trope of the noble savage and appropriating Indigenous cultures. White's vision of the desert is nonetheless antithetical to the sad and monochromatic blank of his settler Australian literary forebears. The perpetually dry and foreboding terrain typical of early Australian literature assumes in Voss various life-affirming forms. From desert showers, "mobs of cockatoos" and "ever-protean light" (*Voss* 141), through to paintings in "providential caves" (229), "mud" and "flood" (231), and waterholes and pocked plains (352), White's desert is ultimately part of an ever "accommodating earth" (357).

Key character transformations in White's work typically rely on such experiences, which abound in ecological detail, growth, and variety. White's characterisation device, which draws elements of the environment into his protagonists to establish settler belonging, is not restricted to Voss. Graham Huggan, for example, argues that many of White's novels:

> effectively turn 'external' things – places, landscapes, natural phenomena – into objective correlatives for the thoughts and feelings of his characters: symbolic representations of their own frequently murky and contradictory 'interior' worlds. (23)

In "The Prodigal Son" (1958) White declared his aim to "people a barely inhabited country," but he also brought material elements of the country's landscape—its dirt, stones, and desert rains—into the settler imagination (17). Voss and Judd, for example, are often described by White in terms of the surrounding environment. Here, White attempts to overcome Eurocentric visions of man in possession of a landscape, instead providing a testament of the way in which the land can not only remake "man," but also serve as the terms of his description.[78] Whether as being "like some desert" or a "stone man," many of White's figures are characterised through references to their immediate natural world (*Voss* 69, 160). That is, settler-descended and migrant-settler characters in *Voss* achieve a connection to the land not merely by suffering in it, or by expanding their consciousness, but by being materially rebuilt in its image.

By using the Australian environment as a fundamental descriptor for his settler characters, however, White does more than attempt to lay down the Western descriptive apparatus and allow the land to provide new ways of saying, describing, and being. White also emblematises a common feature of Australian literature, which variously attempts to circumvent the "timeless unbelonging" of the settler through communion with local nature (Leane "Historyless people" 157). Here the ontological struggle Samuel Cox witnesses in Patrick White's desert language becomes manifest (Cox). Where Wright celebrates a

[78] I have intentionally used the term "man" here because Eurocentric visions, and White's visions of the desert, are overwhelmingly peopled by men.

longstanding connection with the land, White appears driven by a resistance to received and often European ideas about desert environments.

On closer inspection, apparent affinities in the visions of the desert ecology offered by Wright and White are outweighed by their differences. While Wright writes with the land, White attempts to take up its poetics as a way to overcome Eurocentric limitations, and in so doing risks attempting to Indigenise his characters in the landscape. The relationship each author establishes between the water and desert further highlights some of these profound departures. In *Carpentaria*, the sea and the desert are drawn together through characterisations that foreground ancestry, community, and unity. By contrast, in *Voss* the association between the water and the desert is marked by a misplaced sense of discovery, individualism, and hubristic delusion.

In *Carpentaria*, water is part of an inherited connection to the land. Normal Phantom offers the most explicit example of this inheritance. Categorically aligned with the sea and the fluvial forms of the Gulf, Norm is an "old tribal man" (4) who could "grab hold of the river in his mind and live it as his father's fathers did before him. His ancestors were the river people" (6). The relationship between the Phantoms and the multitude of tributaries around the Gulf is grounded in more than spiritual revelation or experience: it is a consanguineous bond drawing on a heritage that reaches back millennia. His son, Will Phantom, leaves his father to join Mozzie Fishman's desert-faring convoy. Despite following Fishman and spending years as part of a migratory desert community, Will does not aspire to, nor does he attain, a privileged connection to the desert. Even in the dusty red centre, he "carrie[s] the tide in his body … a thousand miles away from the sea, he felt its rhythm" (401).

By contrast, the association between the water and the desert in *Voss* foregrounds the role of the visionary individual's privileged connection to the land, earned by living in it, or

even simply by visiting. Paradoxically, this is most salient in the resemblance between Wright's description of Norm and White's description of Voss. While Normal Phantom could "grab hold of the river in his mind" (*Carpentaria* 6), "Voss saw the rivers. He followed them in their fretful course. He flowed in cold glass, or dried up in little yellow pot-holes, festering with green scum" (*Voss* 15). In contrast to Mr Bonner, a materialist "merchant" who "read the words" of the map (*Voss* 127, 15), Voss experiences "the rivers" in an embodied way (15). Over the course of his sojourn, Voss shifts from merely seeing the rivers to having "flowed" in them, indicating a growing immersion in the land. In an inversion of Will's retention of his river ancestry in the desert, Voss essentially becomes a river by simply apprehending it. Here, White exemplifies what Aileen Moreton-Robinson identifies as the settler desire "to achieve the unattainable imperative of becoming Indigenous in order to erase its unbelonging" (10). White's desert ecology is significant for its resistance to received Eurocentric ideas of the desert as a lifeless, waterless place, but the notion that Patrick White advances here through Voss—that visionary and artistic Europeans can overcome their estrangement to the antipodean desert land—advances a colonial, perhaps even broadly Western fantasy of belonging everywhere on "God's green earth."

Contrastingly, Wright's depiction of the Australian landscape is steeped in regional detail and "Aboriginal realism" ("Historyless people" 161). The desert landscape in *Carpentaria* is typical of Australian dry zones, which are often brimming with life. In addition to a unique view of the land and a dense layering of heritage and belief systems, Aboriginal realism offers a defamiliarised view of so-called Western civilisation and culture. For instance, rather than representing useful infrastructure, roads are depicted as "a wound, cut in the country" while the landscape itself "passed by in a yellow-green and red blur of enchanted spirits" (121). Far from an empty or barren plain, Wright's desert is an eminently

complex landscape that simultaneously evokes a sense of the sublime, settler destruction, deep time and ancestry, and local detail.

As opposed to Wright's representation of the desert North, settlers have long envisioned and portrayed the lands of the Gulf as worthless, desolate, and void. Throughout *Carpentaria,* Wright is poignantly aware of this treatment of her Country. In other words, part of her cultural context involves responding to Western perceptions and portrayals. As Philip Mead describes in "Indigenous Literature and the Extractive Industries," Wright sustains "a fictive critique of [this] ideology, the governmental, economic and social discourse about the Gulf country as part of a 'North West Queensland Mineral Province', a geophysical terra nullius" (37). Detailing Wright's depiction of the land, Mead underscores her engagement with historical perceptions of a vacant wasteland as well as a contemporary source of colonial-settler wealth. Wright is unsparing in her portrayal of settler-colonial exploitation. In *Carpentaria*, the same nation that deemed the land worthless is now caught in the act of "pillaging the region's treasure trove: the publicly touted curve of an underground range embedded with minerals" (*Carpentaria* 9). In these ways, Wright not only critiques a global capitalist system that values the land only for its extractive and pecuniary potential but counters a long history of settler representations of the region as an infertile wasteland.

Like Wright, White is aware of the potentially sinister mechanisms of extractive industry in Australia. In the first chapter of *Voss*, there is an exchange between Laura Trevelyan and Mr Bonner in which Voss is clearly distinguished from the most avaricious colonists:

> "He does not intend to make a fortune out of this country, like other men. He is not all money talk."

> "Other men are human," said her uncle, "and this is the country of the future. Who will not snap at an opportunity when he sees one? And get rich," he added, with sudden brutality of mouth. (*Voss* 19)

White's view of colonial extraction is transparently critical—a position reinforced by his well-known environmental activism.[79] For White, being "human" is equated with Western notions of progress or futurity and, in short, getting "rich" (19). This position was made clear in White's later political statement that "reality is the rape of this country for its mineral wealth regardless of the shambles we'll be left in when foreign interests are appeased and the dollars blown" ("State of the Colony" 91-92). There is a difference, however, between Wright's knowledge and protection of her country and White's environmentalism. The cultural significance of the desert in *Voss* predominantly resides in its resistance to British rule and received aesthetic templates for Australian land. Where Wright's novel knows absolutely that the deserts and so-called wastelands of the Gulf have long been rich sites and sources of Aboriginal life, White's desert instead upturns inherited notions of the Australian interior as an arid wasteland.

There are clear and perhaps even obvious cultural distinctions between *Carpentaria* and *Voss*, including—at least—heritage, gender, and historical context. But much like the parallels in the desert ecology of these novels, which typically beget deeper differences, spiritual similarities in *Voss* and *Carpentaria* offer insight into their distinct world views. *Voss* denotes a clear connection between God and the environment, relying on ideas of a Hebraic wilderness to flesh out his understanding of a "New World." *Carpentaria* likewise responds to the Christian desert. The Hebraic wilderness, after all, is not a strictly settler-

[79] For further reading, see: Rooney, Brigid. *Literary Activists: Writer-Intellectuals and Australian public life*. University of Queensland Press, 2009; Ferguson, Peter. "Patrick White, Green Bans, and The Rise of the Australian New Left." *Melbourne Historical Journal*, vol. 37, 2009, pp. 73-8; Huggan, Graham. "Greening White." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 58, no. 1, 2021, pp. 21-35.

colonial inheritance. The British invasion of Australia introduced missionary projects aimed at Traditional Owners of the land, creating a complex and sometimes entwined or syncretic conception of the sacred.[80] Despite great distinctions, *Voss* and *Carpentaria* use the Hebraic wilderness as a lens through which to consider the Australian desert. Some of the key links between the novels arise from these cognate missions. For example, in both novels the desert is a place of spiritual ascension and of prophets and seers. While a rejection of this inheritance is also evident throughout *Carpentaria* and *Voss*, their renunciations are steeped in different epistemologies and experiences.

Many scholars address White's refiguring of the Australian desert into a space of spiritual discovery. Roslynn Haynes, for example, argues that *Voss* (1957) "transformed the Australian desert into a dramatic arena for psychological struggle, spiritual quest and final revelation" (*Desert: Nature and Culture* 172). In "Horizons of Hope" (2014), Ashcroft similarly underscores the symbolic significance of the landscape in *Voss*, suggesting that the novel reoriented local perceptions of the desert towards a sublime, even sacred, space: "For Voss, Australia remains the vast abstraction of its landscape, the canvas for his story of failed self-deification" (30). In contrast to the significance of White's desert as a sacred realm, the imperative role of biodiversity and ecological detail in *Voss* has been overlooked. Regardless of how White's reworking of the settler-colonial relationship to the desert is interpreted—as refiguring the settler vision of the barren desert into a place of spiritual or ecological

[80] The desert in Australia is a site of significant religious syncretism. It is at once a space of recovery, faith, exile, and violence. Missionary projects are vital instruments of colonialism, but over time Christianity often becomes embedded in local belief systems. Studies of syncretism in anthropology, particularly as they relate to Aboriginal belief systems comingling with Christianity, are extensive. For example, in "Syncretism or Synchronicity? Remapping Yolgnu Feel of Place" Fiona Magowan explores the "the idea of religious syncretism" as "a continuous unfolding of two main concomitant processes: spiritual and emotional synchronicity" (276). For the Yolgnu people, Magowan suggests that "synchronicity" refers to "the ways in which knowledge and feelings of ancestral embodiment and Christian revelation come to be experienced simultaneously as a cohesive internal state" (276). As a product of exploration and colonialism, religious syncretism is a complex cultural and personal experience that I cannot speak to with any authority, except to say that it exists and is fictionalised in *Carpentaria.*

significance—*Voss* broke new ground by departing from the settler tradition in Australian literature that rendered the desert empty.

White's approach to spirituality is framed by his resistance to British rule and broader notions of Western progress. His disavowal of Christian orthodoxy may partially be driven by a rejection of Eurocentric imperialist ideals, ostensibly propelled by a combination of personal and socio-political changes in the mid-twentieth century. Early ruptures between his English schooling and pastoral Australian home and his later experiences as a first-hand witness to the cataclysm of World War Two led Patrick White to have serious objections to "this Monarchy foisted on us" ("State of the Colony" 88). His oeuvre also demonstrates an overarching rejection of the celebrated advancements of Western civilisation. As Simon During notes, for White "'being human' is not a value in itself; when all is said and done, white 'civilisation' is empty, inauthentic" (During 31). While unconventional and anti-imperial, White's Christ figures are nevertheless redemptive, offering images of salvation and suffering. In Veronica Brady's words, *Voss* "records less the triumph of individual will than its redirection, and the world it celebrates is one in which the God of necessity, not man, prevails and in which obedience, rather than initiative, is called for" ("The Novelist and the New World: Patrick White's *Voss*" 172). For other scholars, White's relationship to Christianity is more uncertain. Lars Andersson, for example, suggests that "White's novel *Voss* engages with concepts of the sacred, only to challenge direct notions of religious identification" (199) and ultimately "articulates a challenge to the hegemony of meaning in a colonial (and post-colonial) context" (200). Despite an increase in secular and ecological readings of White, a preoccupation with the sacred or spiritual aspects of his work endures. Furthermore, in White's novels the material world and a metaphysical realm are frequently entwined.

Christian tropes are explored throughout *Carpentaria* in relation to the natural world, and they, too, are often linked to rebukes of colonial rule. Such apparent contradictions reveal the realities of colonisation, in which aspects of the invading culture often become interwoven with local practices and belief systems. Wright captures these complexities in her novel, recognising, as Lynda Ng observes in "Translocal Temporalities in Alexis Wright's Carpentaria" (2013), that "[t]he addition of a new culture has transformative effects upon the existing one" ("111). From references to the "prodigal son" (*Carpentaria* 151), Angel Day's vaunted statue of the "Aboriginal Virgin Mary" (338), through to a cockatoo "carried to the desert to be blessed by the pope" (223), Christian imagery is linked with the sacred. As an institution, however, Christianity is typically associated with the instruments of empire. The first words of *Carpentaria* unequivocally dismantle Western epistemological supremacy and introduce the Church as an associated, and violent, colonial mechanism:

> A NATION CHANTS, *BUT WE KNOW YOUR STORY ALREADY.*
>
> THE BELLS PEAL. EVERYWHERE.
>
> CHURCH BELLS CALLING THE FAITHFUL TO THE TABERNACLE WHERE THE GATES OF HEAVEN WILL OPEN, BUT NOT FOR THE WICKED. CALLING INNOCENT LITTLE BLACK GIRLS FROM A DISTANT COMMUNITY WHERE THE WHITE DOVE BEARING AN OLIVE BRANCH NEVER LANDS. LITTLE GIRLS WHO COME BACK HOME AFTER CHURCH ON SUNDAY, WHO LOOK AROUND THEMSELVES AT THE HUMAN FALLOUT AND ANNOUNCE MATTER-OF-FACTLY, *ARMAGEDDON BEGINS HERE.* (1)

Despite the pealing bells heralding the possibility of heaven in the novel's opening declaration, looking around at their own community "little black girls" can only surmise that

"Armageddon begins here" (*Carpentaria* 1). In this regard, the Church symbolises the disjuncture between colonial notions of moral and spiritual progress and Indigenous experience and realities. Rather than a straightforward renunciation of Christianity, however, this and other elements of *Carpentaria* take aim at the imposed construct of the nation. As Jeanine Leane notes, the first page of Wright's novel establishes a "locale that refuses to be aggregated into the broader discourse of 'the nation'. The opening passages of Carpentaria disavow the nation" ("The Vastness of Voice" 136). Where White's desert offers critiques on different national discourses, at times even recreating them, *Carpentaria* widely abjures their very existence.

While both White and Wright question what might be identified as a conventional Christian worldview, each author draws from Hebraic portraitures of the desert, as articulated in the Jewish Torah and the Christian Old Testament. Here, the desert is a place of prophets and a passage to spiritual transformation. White constructs the vital and ecologically diverse desert as a space of exposition and revelation. In this vision, Western civilisation or "Reason" is portrayed as a false refuge: a shelter that connotes cowardice rather than safety (*Voss* 298). Though at times bare, White's desert is not void—it is rather the "fierce heat of unreason" that "threatened to wither any such refuge" (*Voss* 298). That is, taking inspiration from both the local environment and a biblical heritage, the power of White's desert has the capacity to weaken conventions, be they social or epistemological. Here the desert stands as a countervailing force to rationality. Applied to the desert, many of the inherited instruments of Western knowledge, like maps and compasses, are simply inadequate. Compared to the majesty of White's natural world, the intellect and notions of Western advancement are insignificant, burned away by the desert's own fierce heat of unreason.

With different motives and standpoints, both Wright and White turn to the desert as an escape from—and even rebuke of—Western civilisation. While Voss traverses the desert, hoping to test the limits of his will and eventually achieve spiritual redemption, for Wright's characters the desert is a physical fortress against colonial settlement. For White, the greatest threat is becoming beholden to the status quo—to materialist ideals of progress and narrow, assured notions of reason that leave no space for mystery. In other words, White fears and rebukes the settlers' fate of becoming materially comfortable and intellectually complacent. For Wright, the danger is not abstract or philosophical. Instead, her characters' very existence and the continuity of their culture is under threat. Norm recalls his father retreating into the desert while his family were set upon by "powerful, strong men" with "leather saddles … leather boots, leather holsters for guns and whips" (101). In this way, Wright's desert offers a sanctuary from settler-colonial violence. Norm's father seeks safety by entering "into a winter of nowhere" (418) and "into desert locations, so as to be gone from memory as though they had never existed" (419). Once the colonists have left, those who have sought refuge in the desert soon reappear "with their red watery eyes" and plunge "into the ghostly grey and re-streaked lagoon waters, breaking through the thin coating of dust and ash to uncover the fresh, cool water beneath" (419). Such baptismal imagery reinforces the tension Wright upholds between the so-called civilisation imposed by the colonists and Indigenous experience. The desert in *Carpentaria* is not only a site of spiritual revelation, but a place of Aboriginal refuge from white violence.

Despite pronounced differences in the authors' portrayal of the desert, there are stark parallels between Mozzie Fishman and Johann Ulrich Voss. Both are self-imposed exiles from settlement and self-declared seers: men convinced that they see beyond a quotidian reality. Throughout *Carpentaria*, the desert is commonly depicted in relation to Mozzie Fishman, a visionary figure with "one stern eye" (419) and a "religious zealot" (129) who

leads a troupe of "holy pilgrims of the Aboriginal world" (119) through the ancient routes and songlines of the desert. Mozzie, for example, "saw visions when he drifted off with the hot temperatures or the silence and began speaking to himself" but "nobody claimed they ever saw what the Fishman was watching" (126). White's desert visionary is similarly single-minded. Voss's compulsion to traverse the desert transcends appeals to reason or common sensibilities. When asked if he should use a map, Voss famously declares "I will first make it" (*Voss* 14). In an analogous spirit of self-righteous pomposity, Mozzie proclaims: "I should kick the whole flaming lot of you out of the convoy and just go by myself in future" (*Carpentaria* 143). For both Mozzie Fishman and Johann Ulrich Voss, the desert is a space of spiritual possibility, but this potential is at times limited by their unbridled self-assertion.

Key attributes, however, distinguish these visionary figures. While Voss holds the real map of the country internally, or in "the country of the mind" (*Voss* 373), and proposes to make his own map of the country (*Voss* 14), Mozzie Fishman:

> led the way with a long stick, pushing along an ancient path invisible to the naked eye, heading through the foothills. Unquestioningly, instinctively, he was following a map etched in his mind from the times of the many fathers' fathers before him.
> (*Carpentaria* 433)

Despite being almost telepathically connected to Laura, and indeed leading his own convoy through the desert, Voss's experience is unequivocally singular, insofar as his journey of spiritual trial and tribulation must be undertaken alone. As Laura so aptly summarises: "You are so isolated. That is why you are fascinated by the prospect of desert places, in which you will find your own situation taken for granted, or more than that, exalted" (69). The isolation of Voss is framed as a test of will: the trek through the desert is a personal vision and he ultimately ends the journey alone as his companions die or abandon the mission. In contrast,

the communal aspect of Mozzie Fishman's convoy is physically and spiritually necessary: this prophet has his "pilgrims" (*Carpentaria* 128) and where Voss resists companionship beyond necessity, "Fishman picked up anybody" (128). Moreover, unlike Voss, Mozzie is not inventing his own cartography, as Voss appears to when he declares that he will make his own map (*Voss* 14) but relying on ancestral knowledge. For Mozzie, as the narrator of *Carpentaria* surmises: "it could have been that he simply knew the country that's all, like the back of his hand" (129). Mozzie can be heedless, but his spirituality is indelibly bound to the earth through lineage—a relationship to the land that is fundamentally inaccessible to the settler Voss.

The sense of a sacred desert shared by *Voss* and *Carpentaria* and their visionary characters belies deeper distinctions. White's mythology remains a quintessentially Western Christian mythology of the desert because it embraces a trying process of conversion and redemption, whereas Wright's novel rejects these Western overlays on the "ancient" terrain (*Carpentaria* 308). Mozzie Fishman, for example, declares that "biblical stories lived in someone else's desert," and that such veils are the "scourge of the blackfella's earth" (142). Furthermore, for Fishman the landscape is "older than the ornate cathedrals made with stone, or the monasteries and places of worship to relics of bones and other bits and pieces of sanctified saints of old Europe and the Holy Land" (437). In this regard, *Carpentaria* invokes Christian motifs both to undermine notions of Western progress and to emphasise Aboriginal culture as the oldest continuous civilisation in the world (Malaspinas 213).

Despite key differences in the spiritual deserts of *Voss* and *Carpentaria*, there are invitations in the texts to consider some entwining of spiritual heritages. Fishman, for example, likens the ancient desert to the notably less ancient, but "somehow the same," spiritual sites of the West (437). Moreover, Fishman is described as a man who, "once upon a

time … might have been Paul, or something Old Testament like Joshua" (121). In "On Writing *Carpentaria*," Wright reinforces this planetary or worldly aspect of her fiction when she reflects:

> My new novel *Carpentaria* attempts to portray the world of Indigenous Australia as being in constant opposition between different spaces of time. Time is represented by the resilience of ancient beliefs overlaying the inherited colonial experience, which sometimes seems nothing more than hot air passing through the mind, while the almost 'fugitive' future is being forged as imagination in what might be called the last frontier - the province of the mind. (83)

Wright's contemplation of *Carpentaria* and its genesis captures some of the most poignant differences between her novel and *Voss.* Through *Voss*, White extends his hope—clearly stipulated in "The Prodigal Son" (1958) and evident throughout fiction—that from "hatred for the sour colonial soil … a perverse love" might develop (*Voss* 373). As Laura opines at the end of the novel:

> "I am uncomfortably aware of the very little I have seen and experienced of things in general, and of our country in particular," Miss Trevelyan had just confessed, "but the little I have seen is less, I like to feel, than what I know. Knowledge was never a matter of geography. Quite the reverse, it overflows all maps that exist. Perhaps true knowledge only comes of death by torture in the country of the mind." (373)

This oft-quoted passage from *Voss,* often used to underscore the centrality of imagination to postcolonial nationhood, also discloses its limits. After all, settler claims to belonging in Australia essentially turn on "experience" being irrelevant to "knowledge" (373) because settler experience in the land is dwarfed by the continuity of Indigenous belonging. In

contrast, throughout *Carpentaria* "knowledge systems" are clearly developed "over millennia living on and alongside the land" (Moreton-Robinson and Walter 3).

Close readings of desert ecologies, cultural attitudes to the interior, and responses to the sacred wilderness underline intriguing affinities between Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* and Patrick White's *Voss*. But such similarities also accentuate their deepest ideological and ontological divisions. The deserts of *Carpentaria* (2006) and *Voss* (1957) are both celebrated as local and diverse biomes. In contrast to the history of settler depictions, the terrains of Wright and White celebrate Australia's so-called "dry zones" as vibrant and dynamic places, often teeming with life and water. For Wright and White, the desert—a so-called wasteland of *Terra Australis*—is in fact a biodiverse and dynamic space of life, refuge, and metaphysical transformation.

Yet for White, the use of the desert as a characterisation technique is undoubtedly part of establishing settler belonging in a new land, while Wright's characterisation emphasises an ancestral connection to the land and the *a priori* belonging of Aboriginal people. In the engagement of both authors with received notions of the desert as a Hebraic wilderness—an arid plain of spiritual refuge, prophets, and pilgrims—further divisions emerge. White's resistance to this European heritage is part of his greater project of distinguishing Australia from Britain, and celebrates the individual visionary set apart from a largely denigrated collective. While Wright's desert prophet, Mozzie Fishman, is similarly vulnerable to flights of hubris, his endeavour is fundamentally communal, and steeped in an ancestry and connection to the land that is simply unavailable to Voss. The "ancient beliefs overlaying the inherited" of which Wright speaks and that in this case emanate from the land often render this hubris as "hot air passing through the mind" ("On Writing *Carpentaria*" 83). In this regard, a comparative reading of White and Wright has the potential to highlight the "whole

human endeavour in search of new dreams" ("On writing *Carpentaria*" 84) that defines contemporary Australia and its special ecologies. Careful comparative analysis of the desert in Wright and White suggests the primacy of the land itself in both narrative traditions, a primacy that becomes even more apparent in these authors' depictions of the dump. Nonetheless, such comparison also reveals the frequent failure of a largely Western settler-Australian tradition to consider the limits of its relationship with and imagining of local nature and its right to belong on stolen land.

The Dump

The dump has special resonance in a convict colony. As Michael Ackland observes in "'Reclaiming the Rubbish': Outcasts, Transformation and the Topos of the Painter-Seer in the work of Patrick White and David Malouf" (2016), "one of the most persistent images of Australia, and an abiding source of deep local shame, has been the notion of the country as a rubbish dump" (27). Indeed, this image has appeared in works as diverse as Peter Carey's *The Tax Inspector* (1991), Nicholas Jose's *Original Face* (2005), and Alexis Wright's own *The Swan Book* (2013). The dump is a place of salvage and treasure, too. Through acts of reclamation and remaking, the rubbish tip becomes an analogue for the way Indigenous writers like Wright have retrieved treasures from the wreckage of Western civilisation, foisted upon her ancient culture some two hundred years ago. As Alexis Wright acknowledges, her own writing process is a matrix of international, contemporary, and ancient influences, which stretch from the spectral, folkloric terrains of Salman Rushdie through the quiet anguish of Seamus Heaney to the oral storytelling tradition of Wright's Waanyi forebears.[81] In Wright's writing, mixed global inheritances and lineages abound, but localised sites or "locales," as expressed by both literary scholar and Wiradjuri woman Jeanine Leane and distinguished

[81] Heaney is cited in the epigraph to *Carpentaria* and Wright writes about Rushdie in "Breaking Taboos: Alexis Wright at the Tasmanian Readers' and Writers' Festival, September 1998."

Professor and Torres Strait Islander academic Martin Nakata, become powerful "site[s] of Indigenous resistance, contestation, refusal" (Nakata 107).[82] The dumps in Wright's *Carpentaria* (2006) and White's *Riders in the Chariot* (1961) and "Down at the Dump" (1964) are sustained and cross-cultural metaphors through which the treasures and failings of Western civilisation, and often the colonial project itself and its cultural legacies, are illuminated.

By analysing the locale of the dump in select fiction by Wright and White, two key and enlightening areas of difference and confluence emerge: namely, the kind of space offered by the dump and the centrality of regeneration. Despite the common physical environment of the dump and the exploration of shared metaphors of reclamation, waste, and division, the temporal structure of the dump markedly differs. In *Carpentaria*, the dump is an abiding homeland.[83] Its location and attributes shift, but the rubbish tip is a site of identification and return for many of Wright's characters. In contrast, the dumps of Patrick White's fiction, appearing briefly in *Riders in the Chariot* (1961) and developed further in his subsequent short story "Down at the Dump" (1964), are thoroughfares. White's protagonists do not live at the dump but are profoundly shaped by their journeys through it.

Secondly, the final visions of each dump reveal decidedly different approaches to regeneration: chiefly, the distinction between a "whole human endeavour" in Wright's fiction, and the attempt at such an endeavour in White ("On Writing *Carpentaria*" 84). In Wright, home is paradoxically conceived in both local and planetary terms, and the final vision is one of human resilience and nature's unremitting gifts. White's final visions of the dump are

[82] Leane cites Nakata in her essay for *Sydney Review of Books* "Living on Stolen Land: Deconstructing the Settler Mythscape" (2020).
[83] This is also true of *The Swan Book* (2013), but the dump is so significant and enduring in *Carpentaria*—especially compared to its brief appearances in White's fiction—that this analysis only focuses on one of Wright's dumps.

remarkably similar, but narrower in their cultural circumscription. White's fictional rubbish tips are spaces of metaphysical, artistic, and personal metamorphosis, but they are also metaphors expressing hope for a former convict colony built on the remnants of an imperial power. In crafting this national narrative, White leverages an Indigenous presence and the natural world to normalise, and indeed naturalise, the settler presence in Australian land. By considering these lasting impressions of White's fictional dumps through the final depictions of Wright's dump in *Carpentaria*, the rhetorical drive of the settler rubbish tip becomes clear. The closing images of the dump in *Carpentaria*, while regenerative and emphasising nature's resilience, are not about the nation or its imaginary at all. Here, national boundaries are dissolved, and local and planetary visions are brought together: the dump is not a transient passageway for anyone, but a mutable form on an ancient and stable homeland.

Alongside shared metaphorical and political engagement, the dumps of Wright and White contain powerful coincidences in imagery. Both authors, for example, use the motif of a clock. In *Carpentaria*, Angel Day finds a timepiece amid the leavings of the tip, and it symbolises a "future she was already imagining in which the Phantom children would be going to school on time" (22). That is, to Angel Day, Wright's salvaged clock offers the Indigenous Phantom family an opportunity to operate according to the logic of Western, linear timeframes. But this discovery, and what it connotes for Angel Day, is also a commentary on the customary exclusion and refusal of Aboriginal people in the settler state. Through Angel Day, Wright builds a plaintive portrait of the oldest continuing culture in the world often forced, through language, technology, and social structures, to live within the unequal terms of its invasion.

In Patrick White's *Riders in the Chariot*, a recovered clock also appears in the opening scenes of his fictional dump. White's protagonist, the Indigenous painter Alf Dubbo, seeks

refuge from abusive foster parents at the Mungindribble tip, only to end up under the sinister auspices of another settler, Mrs Spice. Despite these dark undertones of his time at the dump, it is here that Dubbo discovers "objects of use and wonder, including the insides of an old clock, which he thought he might like to keep" (435). While White's clock is not given the same symbolic weight as Wright's, its presence nonetheless marks the possibility of discovering treasure amid waste. In this way, the time piece also symbolises Dubbo's stay at the dump more broadly, in which creative gifts and developments—things of "use and wonder"—are found, and perhaps even forged, in a terrain marked by detritus, sickness, and suffering (435). Regardless of many such correlations in the symbolism of the dump between *Carpentaria* and *Riders in the Chariot*, their differences eventually reveal some of the most enduring biases in settler-Australian fiction.

Alexis Wright's fiction conjures diverse images of refuse, from a dystopian swamp full of derelict ships through to a staunch Aboriginal woman creating a home out of the husks of Western civilisation. In *Carpentaria*, Wright revitalises the dump as a popular trope in Australian literature. No doubt aware of its prevalence as a metaphor for the settler colony, Wright introduces her own dump and upturns some of its established connotations. Just as Wright does not discard the entire inheritance of the Western literary canon, she does not simply discard settler tropes, and *Carpentaria*'s mastery rests partly in its engagement with, and deconstruction of, prominent colonial motifs. Nicholas Birns describes this practice as integral to *Carpentaria*, which "registers the inadequacy of Western representation confronting people who, then and now, the West has dishonoured and disinherited" (37).[84] As

[84] In this chapter, Nicholas Birns also refers to this deconstructive practice as an "acquired literary technique" that is distinct from a "pre-rational mythopoeia of traditional Aboriginal culture," but I do not agree with the implication that scholars can or should equate the "mythopoeia of traditional Aboriginal culture" with the "pre-rational" (Birns 37).

I go on to explore, the dump in *Carpentaria* is an exemplar of Wright's ongoing interrogation of Western representation.

Throughout *Carpentaria* Wright surveys varying forms of waste, from literal rubbish tips and material excess through to political and metaphysical belief systems. From the outset of the novel, a parallel is drawn between the dump on the outskirts of Desperance and "*the Aboriginal*" who "*was dumped here by the pastoralists, because they refused to pay the blackfella equal wages*" (4). Wright's "refuse" suggests the variety of dumping grounds in operation here: the tip or rubbish dump itself, full of grotesque "white trash" (16) and another "human dumping-ground next to the town tip" (4). The disgust generated by this dump is not ultimately directed at material waste or the Aboriginal bodies in and around the tip, but towards the often sanitary, but spiritually and morally corrupt, dump of white civilisation—masterfully emblematised in *Carpentaria* by the Uptown people. Through a series of interconnected portraits of material waste and treasure, homelands and dispossession, and decay and regeneration, Wright portrays a dump that is both an indictment of Australia's colonial invasion and a mobilising source of energy and renewal.

Wright depicts the promising potential of the dump through three central figures of the Phantom family: Angel Day, "queen" of the dump, her husband Normal Phantom, an old tribal man of the rivers and the dump's resident artist, and their son, Will Phantom, who eventually oversees the destruction of the mine and survives on a floating isle of rubbish (24). Angel Day is a force of nature: claiming, rebuilding, and reshaping relics of Western civilisation alongside Traditional beliefs and practices. Her husband and son are left with the remainders of the dump after the destruction of the cyclone and mine explosion, and it is chiefly through these figures that Wright conveys the power of the natural world. While the dump of *Carpentaria* is ultimately revealed as a mutable, mobile, and bountiful space, it is

nonetheless a homeland, rather than the haunted, though instructive, thoroughfare characteristic of White's legacy.

Situated on the outskirts of the fictional town of Desperance in the Gulf of Carpentaria, the rubbish tip in Wright's *Carpentaria* is introduced to the reader through Angel Day. Answering only to herself and the spirits of the dump, Angel Day spends her days fossicking through scraps and oozing piles of rubbish for the occasional treasure. The dump is home to the Pricklebush people, who have lived in the "foreign infestation on the edge of Desperance" since "long before anyone in the Phantom family could remember" (4). The dump, they insist, "belonged to everybody" (17). For Angel Day, however, it was her "palace" (17). In contrast to the disgust the dump elicits among the Uptown people, Angel Day feels only pride as the owner of the "Number One house" in the dump (12). Angel is a compelling and intricately drawn character: a local matriarch, provider to six children, and "queen" of the dump (17). Equally, however, she is a possessive and territorial woman and an unfaithful wife to Normal Phantom: a volatile "hornet's nest waiting to be disturbed" (13). Although a complex and fallible character, her dignity and pride are unwavering.

Through Angel Day the reader is introduced to a very different kind of rubbish tip: settler trash is everywhere, but the dump is also a home and place of potential wonder. Far from a sickly site of dirt and disease, for Day "the dump was magnificent" (14), a veritable "palace" of "untold treasure" (17). Rather than becoming embroiled in a capitalist turbine of labour and consumption, here "all she had to do was walk across the road to the rubbish dump, and there she could get anything her heart desired – *for free*" (14). Day's condition is one of poverty but also possibility. As Frances Devlin-Glass observes, in *Carpentaria* "European readers are helped to understand shameful on-the-ground realities" of Indigenous life as well as "the kind of vital and creative existence available in the dump that is not

available in the town's excluding, and doomed (by climatic rigors), bourgeois suburban-style boxes" (Devlin-Glass 84). By providing for Angel Day's physical needs, the dump is a pathway to independence from settler society.

As part of Wright's critique of the Australian state, colonialism is folded into the homeland of the dump. For instance, alongside her treasured timepiece, the most prized of Angel Day's discoveries at the dump is a statue of the Virgin Mary. Serving as talismans of white society, the clock and the Virgin Mary are both potent symbols as well as portents of colonialism:

> They would become like the white people who prayed and said they were of the Christian faith. This was the difference between the poor old Pricklebush people and Uptown. This was how white people had become rich by saving up enough money, so they could look down on others, by keeping statues of their holy ones in their homes. (23)

As Wright outlines, the ordinances of the Australian state are only loosely associated with the Christian faith. In practice, the state worships at the related pillars of money and meritocracy. While aspects of the Western sacred are salvageable, and the objects undoubtedly treasured by Angel Day, they are also wry reflections on what settler society holds most dear: the "prophecy" of "richness" (23).[85]

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[85] The association between local belief systems and Christian mythology continues throughout the novel. Consider, for example, the closing scenes featuring Normal Phantom. Here, images of Christ and the Bible are interspersed with references to the Dreamtime, and personal and cultural differences are bridged. Norm's final journey across the seas of Carpentaria has clear parallels to Christ and even the Arthurian legend of the Fisher King: "Far out at sea in gentle swells, a catboat lolled through forty days and forty nights of good fortune, while the wise man, Norm Phantom, steered the rudder and never slept" (503). The artist here is associated with prophecy, redemption, and physical, rather than simply metaphysical futurity. Christian tropes and images continue as Norm and Hope bicker about the Bible at sea. Norm tells Hope that he "believed in the Bible because the white people had prospered by believing in what the Bible had told them," but Hope is resistant, stating: "No, naturally I don't believe in all of that whitefella stuff" (511). Norm proceeds to justify his belief with a story that borrows from both Christian mythology and the Dreamtime:

> I was walking if you please, straight out of a world that belonged to marine creatures and what have you swimming about in sea water, who had made enemies of men in the history of the Dreamtime. But, that

As well as being a site for the material and ideological off-casts of colonialism, the dump is part of a homeland that predates invasion. Angel Day selects her spot in the dump for its connection to her Traditional Lands and its link to an apparent kinship system:

> "I was born near lilies so I must see lilies," she once told [Norm], calmly pouting towards the waterlilies growing in the swamp at the back, and once that happened, not even a grappling pick would have plied another word about the matter from her own sweet lips. (13)

Rather than justifying her decision to make the dump her own, she announces its inevitability. Angel Day is building a home with the one condition she has for it: she "must see lilies" (13). In this respect, Angel Day's connection to her house in the dump transcends materiality. Instead, it is part of a pre-existing heritage and connection to the land.

Angel Day's all-encompassing appreciation of the dump—from recovered remnants of colonialism through to lilies bursting up through a swamp—is also part of a capacious, planetary sense of home, not unlike the literary homeland Wright is asserting for herself in the writing of *Carpentaria*. Angel is a creative force who builds, rather than merely exists on, homelands, and often does so in a way that eschews colonial structures. At the end of the novel, Angel Day occupies a kind of half world, but even here she forges a life for herself. A place of dreams and nightmares, Angel's new home still bears traces of her former house at the dump. In an "abandoned grey warehouse" alongside a "green-grey foul-smelling river" (454), Angel sleeps under a "mountain of clothes" and casts a line for snakes during the day.

> wouldn't happen to you because you do not know these stories. God don't make miracles happen for people with bad blood filtering through their veins. (511)

While Wright is clear in her suggestion, regarding both Angel Day and Norm Phantom, that Christian beliefs are adopted in the potentially idealistic hope that Christianity will serve Indigenous people as it has served white people, she recognises and records the comingling of belief systems, or religious syncretism, that happens across communities.

The changes in living required by this newly discovered dump seem irrelevant to Angel, who "lives indifferently to her surroundings" (454), and it too is a potential "palace" with Angel its "owl who shone in the night" (456). Her capacity to create and recreate a homeland is part of a broader ecological spirit. As Salhia Ben-Messahel suggests, "Angel Day espouses the notion of ecology in its broadest sense since it derives from the Greek word Oikos, understood as 'home, household, place to live' (Collins Dictionary)" (2). Whether through her broad appreciation of ecology, or through fate or kinship—"the great magnanimity given to Angel Day by the haunting spirits residing in the smelly residue" (16)—for Angel Day, these dumps are part of a vital, ancestral land regardless of its changing façades. Seemingly, even "a devilish place" cannot quell Angel Day's spirit (453).

At the end of the novel, Angel Day is a mythic though flawed heroine. Poignantly, and in opposition to the similarly mythic figure of Voss, whose legacy is to be "written down" (*Voss* 375), Mozzie Fishman commands that Angel's story is not committed to print: "Letters were only from whitefellas to other whitefellas. And what am I? He was a blackfella. No one had any business addressing any darn letter to him, he said" (456). The stories of Angel Day, being retold and read at the end of the novel by Mozzie's zealots, need not be written down: truth exists elsewhere, ensconced outside the bounds of Western representation.

In contrast, rather than steadfast homelands of a mythic scale, the dumps of Patrick White are thoroughfares for his protagonists. Far from mere passageways, however, White's dumps are transformative waypoints on symbolic journeys of maturation. This motif, in which colonial consequences, Indigenous characters, and the natural world are foregrounded, also recurs in subsequent Australian fiction.[86] In White's first fictional dump in *Riders in the*

[86] In David Malouf's *Harland's Half Acre* (1984), the association between the dump and Indigenous characterisation persists, while the relationship between settler belonging, nature, and an Indigenous presence assumes a more central role. In a novel about the reclamation of land through creative possession, this connection is key. Early in the novel, and before he has made a name for himself, Malouf's young itinerant

Chariot, the Mungindribble tip is a vital part of Alf Dubbo's journey as an Indigenous artist, offering ample time and few interruptions. Despite falling into the servitude of the bottle-collector Mrs Spice, Dubbo finds moments of joy and inspiration at the tip, feeling "happiest when he could moon around the rubbish dump" and "dream of paintings" (438). For White, art is the positive of the "two poles of his being": Dubbo suffers tremendously at the dump—and thereafter—but experiences the gift of a redemptive and "regenerating, creative act" (444). The time and space away from Western civilisation, which the dump affords Dubbo, is central to this process of artistic metamorphosis.

Featured in his collection of short stories *The Burnt Ones* (1964), "Down at the Dump" continues White's broader celebration of the visionary individual and the natural world alongside a trenchant critique of the consumerist, anti-intellectual culture of middle-Australia. But here also, liminality and transformation are key. "Down at the Dump" turns on the death of Daise Morrow, and with her funeral held in a cemetery next to the town rubbish tip, White crafts a poignant landscape that bestrides spiritual and material ends. During the procession, Daise emerges as a ghostly presence, conducting a homily on human nature and its principal workings, advocating ultimately for the potential of "love … which sends us whirling, spinning, creating millions of other words" (311). The rubbish tip in "Down at the Dump" is a site of transformation but concerns metaphysical rather than artistic ascendance. Daise Morrow transcends worlds, moving from a corporeal to a spiritual realm, while other characters like Lum Whalley and Meg Hogben experience the first fruits of adolescent love. First love is a significant rite of passage and Meg is overcome—"[s]o many

painter wanders into the local dump. Here, a graveyard of consumerism and Indigenous spirits or *genus loci* become agents for settler visionary redemption with the "native earth" (*Harland's Half Acre* 48). Between the opening lines on white possession and the swift introduction of Indigenous spirits of the land, Australian nature is portrayed as haunted by a history of dispossession, but the scenes at the dump are deeply colonial, expediting settler redemption and belonging through an association with Australian nature and Indigenous figures "black devil[s]" exerting "fierce dark ownership" and "prior right" (55).

discoveries in a short while were making her tremble at the knees" (305). Against the backdrop of the rubbish tip, the importance of love and metamorphosis are the most resonant messages.

Like the multivalent dumps throughout Alexis Wright's fiction, the rubbish tips in White's work are critiques of settler society as well as avenues for transformation. For example, in *Riders in the Chariot* (1961), the dump is presided over by the hateful bottle-collector and sex worker Mrs Spice. An apparition from White's early essay "The Prodigal Son" (1958), Mrs Spice appears in *Riders in the Chariot* with "watery gums" and "old blue eyes," quickly recalling the anti-intellectual culture White famously derided in "The Prodigal Son" (436). That is, in White's much anthologised invective against Australian society, he describes an intellectual culture in which "the schoolmaster and the journalist rule" and "beautiful youths and girls stare at life through blind blue eyes"' while their forebears lose "teeth … like autumn leaves" (15). In keeping with this association of white-settler cultural heritage and vapidity, White introduces Mrs Spice with a description of her skin colour. Before the sun and hard living had turned her into "the colour and texture of mature bacon," the reader is assured "she must have been white once" (436). Like the tip itself, Mrs Spice is a site of decay. Later described as "an old rubbish dump," the identity of White's villain here—and the inspiration for disgust—is clear (443).

This pattern, in which settler-Australians are equated with waste, recurs in White's subsequent rubbish tip. In "Down at the Dump," White captures a snapshot of the class-strata of Australian society, from the dump-diving Whalleys through to the upper-middle class Hogbens. Across different classes, however, the author conveys his usual disdain for most the nation's population: "the heat stupefied the remnants of their minds, and inflated their Australian fingers" (307). Such censure is part of the pattern, traced in Chapter 2 through

Voss (1957) and *Riders in the Chariot* (1961), in which the vacancy once associated with Australian wastelands is relocated to the hearts and minds of the suburban population. Here in "Down at the Dump," trash is their symbolic counterpart.

In White's dumps, the notion of waste captures settler-society in broad terms, reflecting ideologies like consumerism as well as individuals. In "Down at the Dump," for example, it becomes apparent that the real detritus is not only in the hearts and minds of the suburban population but is materialised in the "liver-coloured brick" home of the upper middle-class Mrs Hogben (291). Replete with commodities, the contents of her home are narrated like a shopping list to underscore the empty consumerist drive they represent: "the washing machine, the septic, the TV, and the cream Holden Special, not to forget her husband, Les Hogben, the councillor" (291). In the context of White's story, such items are also emblems of Western civilisation, and products of the cognate and "sicklier" stench "of slow corruption" amassing at nearby industrial centres (297).

The final visions of White's fictional dumps feature Indigenous characters who have been stained or cast aside by settler society, while the Australian environment is a refuge. For example, Dubbo may have achieved artistic maturity, but the abuse he suffered under the reign of Mrs Spice has made him reclusive and physically ill. Nature, however, is an abiding ally. The "generous waters" of Numburra precede Dubbo's journey into the tip, offering shelter, sustenance, and protection to those society has excluded (435). Upon leaving the dump, nature again serves as a refuge: "Alf Dubbo went bush, figuratively at least, and as far as other human beings were concerned" (443). From cattle stations through to country towns, Dubbo retreats into silence and "the scrub of half-thoughts" (443). While an unquestionably central and virtuous character in *Riders in the Chariot*, Dubbo still accords with Indigenous stereotypes in his relative silence and proximity to nature.

Similarly, the peripheral Indigenous character in "Down at the Dump," who is given the blithely racist moniker "Darkie Black," is notable for his silence, appearing only through the narration of settler characters. Darkie first appears through the retelling of Lum Whalley, who fondly describes his friend as a stoic, resolute, and independent man—an aspirational figure for the young Lum. Through the upper-class Meg Hogben, however, White's character assumes a vaguer and more racialised form. After Lum's excited stories about Darkie, Meg can only imagine "the darker hands, the little black hairs on the backs of the fingers" (303). Such differences may serve as commentary on a perceived alignment between classism and racism, which coheres with the story's greater celebration of the working-class and their virtues. In terms of the narrative more broadly, however, the reader is still left mostly with a hackneyed name—"Darkie Black"—rather than a fully-fledged Indigenous character. Moreover, the story concludes with visions of nature and the sense that several settler characters have been transformed at the dump, while Darkie remains imprecise and peripheral. At the end of the story, Daise Morrow has transcended the corporeal realm and Lum Whalley has been introduced to the inklings of first love. With such metamorphoses in tow, the story ends with a landscape that "leaped lovingly" (315) and a vision of "flattened heads of grey grass always raising themselves again again again" (316). Nature is resurgent.

The Indigenous characters in both of White's dumps are positive figures but completely unrepresentative of Indigenous communities. Their heritage is unspecified and vague, and as characters they ultimately function to explore the settler world around them. This rhetorical purpose includes criticising Western civilisation, but their existence in these narratives still turns on settler projects and imaginaries. In other words, rather than embodied and complex Indigenous people, they are small actors in White's greater project of reimagining Australia and its potential as a setter state. Ultimately, White's Indigenous characters in the dump are part of his portrait of nature's universalising power. Culture, sex,

and difference are neutralised under the aegis of national hope, specifically the hope that a resplendent local environment might offer to a settler nation founded on the residuum of another, greater colonial power.

The regenerative aspects of Patrick White's dumps have been thoroughly addressed in the secondary literature, but in their focus on the beneficence of White's vision of nature and Australia, such approaches typically fail to consider the problems and complexities of his Indigenous characterisation. For example, in "'Reclaiming the Rubbish': Outcasts, Transformation and the Topos of the Painter-Seer in the work of Patrick White and David Malouf," Michael Ackland jointly analyses the dumps in the fiction of Patrick White and David Malouf for their "new ways of understanding and laying claim to the continent" (27). Ackland also commends both authors for surpassing the "period when the *indigene* could be banished or reduced to a diminutive supernumerary" (28). While diligently praising White for his inclusion of Aboriginal characters, Ackland overlooks the troubling terms of their inclusion. Alongside celebrating the growing visibility of Indigenous characters in settler fiction, the role and function of these characters as, in Jeanine Leane's words, "the Whiteman's Aborigine" must be foregrounded for a more fulsome account of the rubbish tip in White's fiction ("The Whiteman's Aborigine" 45).

White's settler biases are evident throughout *Riders in the Chariot*, including its scenes at the dump. The story of Dubbo's visionary redemption was undoubtedly part of White's exploration of Australia as a promising alternative to the so-called Old World. From this vantage point, Australia might cast aside the most egregious failures of England and embrace the ancient cultures of its Traditional Owners. For example, White's portrayal of Alf Dubbo offers a fresh antipodean counterpart to the European template of the "artistes maudits" or tragic artist, as Ackland demonstrates ("Reclaiming the Rubbish" 28). But as well

as being a tragic artist, Alf Dubbo is a tragic "half-caste," a trope Jeanine Leane delineates in "Tracking Our Country in Settler Literature" (2014). Here, Leane traces a tendency in Australian literature to cast "mixed race characters as defined by blood" as "tragic" figures, while "full bloods are savage" (3). Crucially, the rhetorical function of associating Indigenous figures with tragedy and savagery is designed to serve the settler. As Leane expands:

> [T]hese representations present Aboriginal country and characters as sites of 'knowing' the self and belonging, by taking the reader back to an imagined past in order to belong or somehow settle in the present. And, in the reconstructed past and the representations of Aborigines there's a 'foundation story' an Indigenisation story for settlers. (3)

Rather than complete and nuanced portrayals of a human experience, the Indigenous characters in White regularly facilitate "an Indigenisation story for settlers" (3). This practice occurs across not simply one or two novels, but as a consistent feature of White's fiction—and notably in his dumps.[87]

The fictionalised dumps of Patrick White are universalising visions that serve a national project. Bringing binaries like settler and Indigenous and lower class and upper class into broader struggles of vision and blindness and mechanisation versus the natural world, White's dumps are ways of imagining settler belonging in a "New World." Such reconciling images were designed, as White concedes, in the hope that his fiction might help "people a barely inhabited country with a race possessed of understanding" ("The Prodigal Son" 17). The Nobel Prize committee similarly described White's work as introducing a "new continent

[87] Malouf's fiction reveals a similar orientation to the land and its Traditional Owners. Citing a discussion of Australian English by David Malouf in *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty* (2015), Aileen Moreton-Robinson observes his failure to notice how "this language is also tied epistemologically to a possessive investment in whiteness" (Moreton-Robinson 26).

into literature" ("Nobel Prize in Literature 1973"). For scholars like Michael Ackland, however, White's dumps create "new ways of understanding and laying claim to the continent" ("Reclaiming the Rubbish" 27). In other words, White's fiction was a national project designed to imaginatively settle Australian land. While Indigenous characters are not "banished or reduced to a diminutive supernumerary" (28), they are yoked into a dream of settler nationhood and belonging that still resonates throughout Australian fiction. In White's dump, this national narrative is sometimes overshadowed by larger critiques of Western civilisation and related ideas of rationality and progress.

In contrast, Wright's regenerative vision of the dump is planetary and local—but never national. The rubbish tip in *Carpentaria* is characterised by its provision of a homeland, as we have seen, but also by its concluding visions of nature and humanity. Rather than leveraging an Indigenous presence in the dump to legitimise the settler's place in Australian nature, Wright's final impressions of the dump centre Indigenous experience and the natural world irrespective of the vagaries of the settler state. While Wright's dump has its own artists and visionaries, with the locale becoming a metaphor for rebuilding from and within ruins, the humanity of her characters, alongside the natural world, prevails.[88]

Despite being a steadfast homeland, the local rubbish tip in *Carpentaria* is just as generative as the dumps of White, from the survival instincts of Angel Day through to the creative outputs of her husband, the gifted artist Normal Phantom. Carving out a space within the "hornet's nest" (13) of their house "inadvertently built on the top of the nest of a snake

[88] In "Breaking Taboos: Alexis Wright at the Tasmanian Readers' and Writers' Festival, September 1998," Wright discusses the role of literature in political action. Using Salman Rushdie's essay on Günter Grass and "Rubble Literature" to reflect on the parallels between post-war and Indigenous fiction, Wright describes how "these writers tried to make sense out of what had happened, and tried also to build something of their lives in the society in which they were born. We have also been through war. And we are not through yet" ("Breaking Taboos"). As Wright outlines, being Indigenous in the settler-Australian state means existing in a war zone that is physical, economic, and spiritual. Just as any post-war or war-torn society must rebuild from these remnants, the dump in *Carpentaria* is a site of restoration amid off casts of a civilisation.

spirit" (13), Norm quietly tends to his crafts in the dump. Taking dead fish and transforming them into resplendent jewels that recall the surrounding reefs, Norm is a key figure of artistic regeneration in the novel.[89] Like the construction of Day's home, Norm's art is a form of "upcycling waste and creatively regenerating what had been discarded" (Lehartel 14). While Day is the matriarch of the home, to his family and the local Pricklebush mob Norm is the master of a "world of fantasised hidden treasure" in which he is "intricately creating fish jewels of silver, gold and iridescent red, greens and blues" (194). While onlookers equate Norm's gifts with "the great skill of robbing the natural function of decay" (194), Norm sees the true progenitor of his creative vision as God. The artist is a mere spectator of such powers:

> These, he said, were mixed using the secret measurements of life, and pearl crushed into a fine powder. All his painted fish possessed a translucent gleam of under-the-sea iridescence made from the movements of sun rays running through the wind currents. God creates Gods friends. The angels helped him, the children were told. (196)

By his own account, Norm's art is a product of providential power. Alchemical taxidermy begets spiritual communion and the expression of some greater divine purpose, for which Norm and the surrounding tip are mere conduits. The dump here is not simply an opportunity to reclaim or repurpose junk, but a site of cultural and spiritual renewal.

The end of Norm's character arc evokes a sense of continuity, consanguinity, and endurance. After journeying across the seas, Norm eventually reaches the dump, miraculously and yet without heraldry, to begin anew. Accompanied by his grandson Bala and daughter-in-law, Hope, who is also the daughter of his sworn enemy Joseph Midnight, Norm's re-entry

[89] While there are similarities between Norm's spiritual inspiration and enervation and the artists in the dumps of White's and Malouf's fiction, Norm's exiles and evolutions often serve communal goals, rather than at the altar of art and the individual. Moreover, the end of Norm's journey is marked by his return to the dump, while White's and Malouf's characters leave. There are perhaps ontological differences here between nature as something that can be drawn upon, even for creative inspiration, and the land as a homeland to which human beings are indebted and to which they must attend.

into the dump is a shedding of old divisions. With Hope leaving to rescue Will, and with a child by his side, Norm's arrival is a gesture at union and generational renewal. "In his heart," the reader is told, "Norm knew he had no more journeys to make" (518) and the land itself remains "singing the country afresh" (519). The dump is not a midway point on his journey, but a stable point of return, and vitally, the journey is not undertaken alone. The closing images of the novel show Norm Phantom and his grandson Bala walking towards the site of their old home in the dump of Westside, surrounded by the hum of "dozens of species all assembled around the two seafarers, as they walked" (519). Even after the cataclysm of the cyclone and the explosion of the mine, nature is triumphant.

As the son of Normal Phantom, Will inherits some of his father's visionary and creative zeal, offering a unique reflection on the dump in *Carpentaria*. Will is introduced to the reader as part of Mozzie Fishman's desert convoy and the novel ends with the two men masterminding the destruction of the Century mine. Will survives as a castaway, living on one of the islands blasted out to sea upon the mine's explosion. Surrounded by the refuse of the dump he grew up in, Will is caught between the desire for home and the hope that something may be rebuilt from these dispersed wastelands. But Will is not an artist in the same way that his father is, and more closely—though not neatly—resembles that related trope of Australian literature, the explorer. As Demelza Hall contends, "the journey Will takes on the floating island of rubbish is a journey of self-awareness; towards reconnecting with community but also re-imagining the parameters of home, nation and identity" (Hall 14). Far from revelling in his new life of seclusion, "the time Will spends on the floating island of rubbish is underscored by his acute sense of ambivalence; his inability to reconcile his desire to remain isolated with his wish to be rescued or liberated" (Hall 16). Ambivalence and resistance to closure are arguably part of the novel's wider resistance to any demand that plots be encoded

by “Western universalisms” (Leane, “Living on Stolen Land: Deconstructing the Settler Mythscape”).

Will nonetheless oversees the restoration of the dump into a fertile space, serving successively as both paradise and hellscape—and potentially as a metaphor for the Australian colony. Wright’s vision of the mind as a “province” (“On Writing *Carpentaria*” 83) becomes a unique environmental tableau that combines locality and mobility: an “extraordinary floating island of rubbish” (*Carpentaria* 493). Will’s jettisoned archipelago is initially overcome with waste: “dead fish” (492) and “green bags tied up with rubbish” are strewn across the terrain, while “the stinking air manufactured by the porridge of decaying fish and gladly, the nauseating stench” permeates the senses (493). Even the encircling ocean is contaminated with “buoyant bodies” and “bloated animals floating by” (493). Nature, however, is undeterred: “Flocks of birds came and went on their seasonal migrations. They seemed to accept the drifting structure as a new land” (495). Human wreckage is transformed by their routine arrival: “The nests they constructed with the bones of dead fish and droppings eventually covered the entire surface in a thick fertilising habitat, where over time, astonishing plants grew in profusion” (495). Images of revulsion are suddenly transformed into a paradisal display of nature’s triumph:

> Bobbing coconuts took root and grew into magnificent palm trees. Seedlings of mangrove, pandanus and coastal dune grasses came with the tides, other plants blew on board as seed, and none withered away. A swarm of bees arrived, as did other insects, and stayed. All manner of life marooned in this place would sprout to vegetate the wreckage. (495)

For Wright, life itself “springs eternal in the human breast” (Pope “Essay on Man”, Epistle I, III). In contrast to the origins of this phrase, which suppose that “the proper study of mankind

is Man" ("Essay on Man", Epistle II, I), Wright's work reflects some of the problems associated with a culture, nominally a European settler culture, whose abiding premise has been to study itself. The ongoing destruction of the natural world is one reason a more planetary outlook might be beneficial. Such worldliness, however, does not exclude the individual and their primary needs. Indeed, in his relative paradise, replete with "bobbing coconuts" and "all manner of life" (*Carpentaria* 495), Will is "Happy" (496). In *Carpentaria,* however, being human means being subject to its various forms of undoing. As naturally as the ecstasy of Will's survival recedes, melancholy emerges: "So, melancholy started to grow in the island's rich fertile atmosphere and competed for life just like any other seed planted on the island" (499). Rather than distinguishing human beings and waste from the natural world, Will's life on the island of refuse reflects their shared planetary engagement.

The dumps in Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* and Patrick White's *Riders in the Chariot* (1961) and "Down at the Dump" (1964) highlight the phantoms and perils of modern Australia. As an adaptive and politically evocative metaphor, the dump clarifies significant aspects of tension, and even disgust, in the Australian nation-state, including materialism and racism. In other words, these wastelands emblematise the deep and steady failures of the colonial project. As assuredly, however, rubbish is also used to explore the regenerative possibilities of art, home and belonging, and the natural world. Wright's dump offers a suitable metaphor for the mistreatment of First Nations people and the material excesses of consumerism, especially as by-products of settler-colonialism. But for Wright, dumps also contain overlooked and cast-off treasure. They are, resonantly, homelands and sites of resilience that offer sustenance for physical and cultural survival, as well as testimonies of nature's ongoing numinous power. The positive potential of the dump reverberates in White, but here the tip is primarily a thoroughfare or waypoint on a metaphorical journey towards national and settler belonging. Both authors use the locale of the dump to highlight the

capacity of the natural world to flourish even in the most apparently hopeless environments, with Wright and White ultimately building portraits of repurposing and renewal.

As with their portraits of the desert, Wright's and White's images of the dump share many features. But they also differ in key aspects. Wright's dump is a homeland, responsive to and reflective of its local environment, but it is also a motif that shifts across time and space, from appearing in an apparent dream-world through to a rubbish tip strewn across a range of isles in the Pacific Ocean. Moreover, Wright's characters salvage treasure that has been cast off by wealthy westerners, adding items of imported cultural value to their homeland of resilience and salvage. In contrast, White's dumps are always contained and national spaces that characters pass through. As a metaphor for the Australian colony, White's dump suggests that Australia's future might be made from scraps, but that there is hope for transcendence. In its worldlier outlook, the rubbish tips of *Carpentaria* suggest that the site is locally informed, but a planetary feature: the earth has already been laid to waste and dumping grounds are everywhere. Here, however, the survival of characters within the dumps suggests that human beings can recover from even this level of decimation. Indeed, in many ways Indigenous communities in Australia already have.

On Legacy and Salvage

Patrick White is one of Australia's most indisputably canonical authors, and Alexis Wright is increasingly being spoken of in canonical terms, often alongside White.[90] In "Philosophy, Canonicity, Reading" (2012), Tony Simoes DaSilva and Brigitta Olubas describe Patrick White as "perhaps the most iconic canonical author in Australia" (2). Olubas and Simoes

[90] Rooney expands on White's canonicity to suggest that 'debates about Patrick White's canonicity, and questions about his (and its) elitism – his seeming 'despair about the majority of the Australian people' – can therefore be seen as a function of broader cultural debates about social relations and their reproduction' (xv).

DaSilva then commend to their readers another essay in the same volume that "returns us in some sense to the canonical through its focus on Alexis Wright's acclaimed *Carpentaria*" (3). Similarly, and as we have seen, in his 2017 monograph *On Patrick White*, Christos Tsiolkas suggests that "the only Australian writers who can now follow on from [*Voss*] are Aboriginal writers" (24). Yet the idea that Aboriginal writers "can now follow on" from Patrick White's mythologising of the land is troubled and raises some of the problems that arise in rhetorical or evaluative comparisons (24).[91]

Some one hundred years ago in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1911), TS Eliot described legacy as a moving beast: the status and reception of older works shifts and adapts in accordance with the historical moment in which they are framed. He explains:

> The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new. Whoever has approved this idea of order, of the form of European, of English literature will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past. (37)

While Eliot is chiefly describing the formation of a canon as a dynamic project, legacy itself is also retrospective and recursive, as he concedes. Eliot was certainly not considering the

[91] In the rhetorical deployment of comparison, texts are compared to persuade a reader of the relative merits of a text, while evaluative comparison bring texts together to establish the supreme worthiness of a particular text. Hermeneutic comparison, in contrast, compares texts to understand or interpret them, usually in relation to a specific historical period or, as is the case in my own work, to highlight a Western cultural lens that can be hard to discern from within Western culture.

wealth of Indigenous storytelling traditions that predate European and English literatures, but his point holds that influence and reception are bi-directional. The tradition from which Alexis Wright writes arguably predates White's landscape legacy, and that of his successors such as David Malouf. Legacy is conventionally understood in literary analysis within a Western temporal framework: a legatee must succeed their forebear chronologically. Moreover, legacy is temporal, status-oriented, and operates within a praxis of assigning cultural value. But time, as is evident throughout Wright's fiction and non-fiction, is as cultural as it is scientific. Angel Day's inclusion of the Western timepiece in her dump suggestively evokes the way Wright's own writing represents acts of both survival and salvage.

Similarly, Alexis Wright's deserts do not encounter limits. The land that inspired Wright's *Carpentaria* (2006), White's *Voss* (1957), and even Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* (1993) occupies a similar corner of the Australian continent. Imaginatively, they are also remarkably different, simply because there is no land in fiction, only landscape. The "Australian landscape" is a settler construction predicated on invasion. As such, a study of landscape in Australia, even within the scope of White studies, which so often concerns imaginative possession of place, is bound by lineage to the first act of Indigenous dispossession.

By comparing the landscapes of Patrick White and Alexis Wright, the limits of White's landscape legacy become apparent. Perhaps more revealing, however, is the way that Alexis Wright's portraits of the desert and dump align with Patrick White's vision. From the desert as a biodiverse and sacred realm through to the dump as a place of reclamation and artistic and environmental regeneration, the writing of Wright and White suggests some common experience of the land, or at least these locales. Whether through the past two

centuries of shared history and environment, or simply the fact of being human, there are now affinities and entanglements, alongside resistances and refusals, between Indigenous and settler representations of the land. But it is precisely among these similarities that some of the most profound cultural departures emerge. In brief, White's fiction attempts to centre the land, and to some extent it does, but this is often overshadowed by centring settler mythologies of the nation. Within these mythologies are visions of the infinite, but they are chiefly imaginative, in part because the place of the setter in Australian land must be imaginative for it to be legitimate. There is no legitimacy in stolen land, and in settler narratives this legitimacy is sought through imaginative possession of place. In contrast, Wright's landscapes do not strive for legitimacy or authenticity because they are already authentic. The nation is irrelevant to the natural world and her narratives welcome time-bound readers to an ancient land with abiding vitality.

Not by sheer coincidence do Alexis Wright and Patrick White portray the desert and dump in their novels. These locales capture some of the unique and enduring experiences of antipodean land. For over two hundred years, settlers grappled with ideas of Australia as an empty desert land, a tabula rasa, a hideous blank, and a land whose only worth was extractive. But equally, it was a place of possibilities, a place to cast off "Old World" traditions that had failed, offering the potential to create a "race possessed of understanding" ("The Prodigal Son" 17) or new "tribal lands" for the settler ("Civilisation, Money and Concrete" 25).[92] In White's attempts to adopt the land's own terms, and to transplant his settler characters into it, he is ultimately still struggling to sublimate his Western ontology and literary apparatus to

[92] The full quote from White's "Civilisation, Money and Concrete" (1979) states: "Only recently politicians have come to recognize the rights of Aborigines to their tribal lands – not only as traditional hunting grounds, but because they are filled with associations of the spirit. When, I wonder, will politicians, and aldermen in particular, recognise that white Australians too have a right to their tribal lands? Some residents of Victoria Street have in some cases, I understand, lived all their lives in houses where their parents lived before them. What is to become of such people is one of the great problems in this developing city."

Australian nature. Conversely, Alexis Wright's fiction salvages parts of the Western tradition and invites the settler Australian and Western reader onto her country, putting land first and last. Rather than transplanting Wright into White's legacy, in which both authors attempt to reconcile the land with Western ways of being, what this chapter has revealed is the vitality of Wright's more planetary vision of regeneration, and her more accommodating vision of salvage.

The end of chapter three touched on David Malouf's speech at the bicentenary of colonisation in 1988, in which he contemplated the deep shame that settler myths of Bennelong should confer to the settler population. In Malouf's retelling, Bennelong's story represents a "capacity to re-imagine things, to take in and adapt," which "might be something we should learn from, something that comes closer than a nostalgia for lost unity to the way the world actually is, and also to the way it works" ("Landscapes" 59). Malouf's retelling sometimes wanders into vaguely mystical territory, where the noble, gentle Indigenous figure is valorised and adaptation and reconciliation are touted, without consultation, as the objectives of intercultural relationships. But his speech does capture some of the most fundamental differences between Alexis Wright and Patrick White. Reading White through Wright is also a reminder "of something we need to keep in mind: which is the extent to which Aboriginal notions of inclusiveness, of re-imagining the world to take in all that is now in it, has worked to include *us*" ("Landscapes" 59). Alexis Wright is extending a view to settlers, making room for them in her world, through her expansive perception and imagination. White seeks these qualities in his fiction, but they are arguably never fully realised. This failure is perhaps attributable to the fact that he never wrote as though he was part of, or complicit in, Indigenous dispossession, and because he resisted the idea that Australian culture is necessarily and deeply British. White's legacy of the land is ultimately about the centrality of perception and imagination, but beyond this it is also about the ongoing

failure of the Western tradition to consider itself as a tradition, rather than as a neutral aesthetic order.

Conclusion

Criticism of the place and significance of Patrick White within Australian literature has increased since his death in 1991. White is no longer an assured presence overarching the local literature, and scholars have reasonably questioned his relevance, canonicity, and lasting messages. This thesis maintains his relevance within a specific remit: White's celebration of the Australian environment mattered, and his novels contributed to the development of Australian literary landscapes. White's influence has not always been constructive, but it is enduring, and can be traced through contemporary authors like David Malouf.

In March 2022, Graham Huggan published an article predicting an ecocritical turn in White studies. In "Greening White," Huggan outlines how White's fiction has often served as a "touchstone" for critical trends (32) and, as such, is now "ripe for a planetary reading" (22). Ecological and material readings of White are inevitable, particularly given White's history of political environmentalism, the primary role of landscape in his fiction, and the current era of ecological crisis. By bringing an environmental lens to White's work and considering it in the context of more contemporary writers, his place within the national literature is undoubtedly critically updated. Nonetheless, reappraising Patrick White's depictions of Australian land, regardless of the approach, requires reviewing a landscape made by and for white settlers.

Across four chapters, I have traced Patrick White's evolving vision of the landscape and interrogated his legacy through comparison to contemporary authors. After charting key stages in White's portrayal of the Australian landscape in Chapter One and Two, I considered how this tradition might be revisited in the fiction of David Malouf and Alexis Wright in Chapters Three and Four. By identifying the origins of White's landscapes, their unique cultural and environmental significance, and their potential reverberations in the work of later authors, his legacy has been reappraised and recontextualised. Alongside the uniqueness of White's environmental vision, I hope to have captured some of its limitations.

After placing Patrick White's fiction within a brief cultural and literary history of landscape in the Introduction, I contextualised White's emergence against the backdrop of settler-colonial Australia and its literature. In Chapter One, I explored White's early landscape vision. Far from amounting to "nil," as the author claimed, White's first two novels are central to his landscape legacy, establishing a blueprint for later depictions of the land in his fiction. In *Happy Valley* (1939), White establishes three key ideas that become central to his ongoing depiction of the landscape. Firstly, White responds to and supplements established depictions of the Australian environment. Secondly, antipodean terrains are consistently compared to those of the "Old World"—and it is Australia, not Europe, which emerges as the older, more vital, and promising land. And finally, from White's first published novel, human connection to the natural world is inhibited by various aspects of Australian settlement, including formal possession of the land and its commercial uses. White did not need to return to Australia to capture the resonances of its landscapes: its value was already firmly imprinted on his mind in his first novel *Happy Valley*.

In White's second novel, *The Living and the Dead* (1941), his landscapes are vitally transformed into cerebral, visionary realms. Despite containing comparatively scarce impressions of Australian land, it is in *The Living and the Dead* that White develops his abiding view of Australian nature: namely, that it might serve as a viable alternative to the so-called Old World, offering not only a geographic antipode but also a psychological and imaginative one. There are still key devices and themes that are yet to be explored. For example, White has not yet developed the central protagonist or visionary figure that defines his later landscapes, and disconnection between individuals and the land largely persists. While some characters, like Elyot Standish, are on the verge of revelation, these epiphanies are forestalled. *The Living and the Dead* suggests a writer yet to achieve his full artistic powers, but nonetheless marks a crucial turning point in White's developing notion of

landscape. No longer distinct from the individual, landscape has become a physical analogue of the inner self, and the power and potential of White's imaginative terrains obviously have significant ramifications for his subsequent novels.

With Australia established as an ancient terrain full of promise, and landscape intimately tied to interiority, in White's next novel *The Aunt's Story* (1948) these ideas are combined to uncover the hidden potential of Australian land. Rather than a diverse group of equally important characters, *The Aunt's Story* focuses on a sole protagonist. The most fully-fledged character of White's career thus far, Theodora Goodman is an outsider and visionary figure, capable of seeing beyond the quotidian. Empirical facts, White suggests, can hide the truth of a land—and conversely, imagination might reveal them. White's representation of the environment is remarkably consistent, but Goodman is the first character to truly apprehend and connect with the natural world set out before her. In "Jardin Exotique," the fragmentation and interiority that plagued White's early characters become an experience of transformative possibility. White has struck upon the central device of his fictional career: unique insight bestowed upon a few exceptional characters facilitates a relationship to nature, other visionaries, and existence itself. Theodora Goodman understands that entire worlds are created in the mind, and with that gift of revelation, everything, including connection to an unknown land, is possible. Rather than a prelude to White's major novels, his early works are key sites for the development of his environmental vision, exemplifying its abiding themes: an ancient "New World," the growing centrality of landscapes of the mind, an increasingly pessimistic portrayal of Europe, and a return, in *The Aunt's Story*, to an Australian setting. By the time White publishes his next novel, *The Tree of Man* (1955), hope is not placed in external, civilising forces that had failed, but in the individual.

In Chapter Two, I explored what White makes of this new visionary character and potential to connect to the natural world. From the publication of *Happy Valley* (1939)

through to his final novel *Memoirs of Many in One* (1986), White fictionalised a diverse array of Australian landscapes. Of these varied and paradigmatic terrains, White's desert and suburb stand apart for their cultural influence. There are limited studies, however, of the material and planetary significance of *Voss* (1957), and scant consideration of the novel's relationship to its successor, *Riders in the Chariot* (1961). By tracing the desert of *Voss* through to the suburb in *Riders in the Chariot*, an unexplored connection between the vitality and splendour of White's desert and the barren cultural and spiritual centres of his suburban and urban terrains emerges.

The expanse of the desert, far from being a physical analogue of the "Great Australian Emptiness" ("The Prodigal Son" 15), becomes in White's hands profoundly enabling for the settler. Upturning received, predominantly European ideas about the desert as a barren wasteland, *Voss* charted new territory in Australian fiction. Rather than the sad, monochromatic blank typifying the deserts of White's literary predecessors, the deserts of *Voss* are vital portraits of biodiverse, inhabited, and life affirming spaces. This bountiful biodiversity is a key part of White's developing characterisation technique, in which characters are increasingly composed in terms of their natural surrounds. In this way, White brought material elements of the desert countryside—its dirt, stones, and even rains—into the people. That is, settler and migrant characters achieve a connection to the land not merely by suffering in it, or by expanding their consciousness, but by being rebuilt in its image. Rather than stagnant associations, however, the environmental adjectives White uses to describe his characters shift in accordance with surrounding nature. In a lush terrain, characters might be described in terms of green foliage or primordial mud, while in the desert White's characters become rugged men of rocks or vulnerable, friable stone. Adjectives vary not only according to changing environments but specific beholders and situations. Vision, as always in White, is crucial. With close attention to the material environment, a celebration of the regenerative

power of the desert, and the inclusion of these details in individual portraits, White revalorised the underrepresented terrains and spiritual possibilities of Australia's geographical desert.

There is arguably another desert, however, that White explored in equal measure—the desert of the human mind. For White, privileged perceptive faculties, a combination of individual vision and innate capacity, bring great insight. The troubling intellect, however, can be a source of arrogance and unchallenged notions of Western progress, and its darker adumbrations are unveiled in the urban and suburban spaces of *Riders in the Chariot*. Rather than an indictment of suburbia, however, White's suburban terrains are complex and multidimensional spaces that contain both the worst of human civilization and its most redeeming aspects. Featuring factories churning out hatred and mechanised reproduction, flourishing environments on old estates, and homes belonging to the novel's most visionary figures, White's suburb is an ominous portent of Western progress and a space of abiding hope. The natural world is everywhere—just as God is immanent in the everyday—and the capacity of the visionary beholder outweighs even the concrete impediments of an urban jungle. Miss Hare finds the power of the natural world in a crumbling mansion, while Alf Dubbo reaches exultant artistic and visionary powers amid squalor. After all, if possession of the land is an imaginative pursuit, what lies before the beholder is secondary. What can be discerned is more vital, and this responsibility is cast back on the perceptive powers of the individual. Thereby, a key aspect of White's landscape legacy is cemented: after William Blake, from whose work the epigraph to *Riders in the Chariot* is taken, for White perception is everything, and even more central to a relationship with nature than the land itself. Taken in succession, *Voss* and *Riders in the Chariot* suggest that all landscapes, be they man-made or wild, belong in the end to "the country of the mind" (*Voss* 373).

The notion of a bountiful Australian environment—revealed only to select inhabitants—reverberates throughout the works of many contemporary writers, but it is nowhere more apparent than in the fiction of David Malouf. In Chapter Three, I began to consider and contextualise White's enduring landscape legacy by addressing its afterlife in Malouf's novels and short stories. Routinely foregrounding perception, exploration, and imaginative possession of the land, the younger author's landscapes suggest many of the same driving themes and literary and artistic influences as White. Nonetheless, Malouf departs from his predecessor in one significant way: White's position on the rectitude of imaginative possession of the land was authoritative and unwavering, whereas Malouf's engagement is more ambivalent.

In his equivocal exploration of the imaginative connection between settlers and Australian place, Malouf's landscapes bring forth the limits of White's vision. Once White struck upon the conceit of a visionary protagonist advancing imaginative possession of the land, he rarely deviated from it. Malouf, however, begins with this conceit and increasingly questions it throughout his career, which I traced from *Johnno* (1975) through to "The Valley of Lagoons" (2007). Unlike White, Malouf's visionary outsiders learn to survive Australian nature, and so must reckon with it. In pushing White's original conceit to its limits, two clear implications for White's landscape legacy become clear. Firstly, connection to the land through vision and imagination is at times mere "colonial fairytale" (*Remembering Babylon* 17). Secondly, Malouf's increasing depiction of settlers surviving Australian land and connecting to its Traditional Owners reveals some of the primary consequences of White's landscape mythology: the imaginative project of nationhood, settling the settler on stolen land, and the white-Indigenisation narrative.

Across four sections and a coda, Chapter Three traced Malouf's fiction chronologically to capture both White's influence on the younger author and Malouf's

eventual departures. In *Johnno* (1975), a perceptive outcast crafted in the mould of White's visionary explorers engages with the mythology of the land and nationhood. After White, Malouf's first protagonist is subsumed by the land, with perpetuity established in narrative forms. A more self-conscious and critical engagement with settler mythmaking is already clear. As Malouf's landscapes evolve, he begins to address Australian landscapes as sites of Indigenous dispossession, which assumes a relatively prominent role in *Remembering Babylon* (1993). Malouf is undoubtedly more aware of Indigenous personhood and sovereignty than White was, and in his hands the very capaciousness of White's imaginative possession of the land also becomes a source of futility and imprecision. But this kind of landscape is no less capable of advancing colonial claims: in fact, its mutability and immateriality make it harder to dispute. In other words, Malouf's "bleaker" and "ironised" moments acknowledge the limits of settler claims to the land while reproducing them (McCredden 4). An under-acknowledged truism underlies this practice. When settler writers like White and Malouf create portraits of a shared natural world and imaginative realm dependent chiefly on perception, their landscapes are necessarily as contained by cultural and nationalistic lenses as those of their European and British ancestors.

In Chapter Four, the role of White's landscape legacy in a settler nation-building project, and his related use of white-Indigenisation narratives, is examined through a comparative reading of the desert and dump in Alexis Wright's fiction. As a Waanyi woman from the Gulf of Carpentaria, Wright is drawing on a storytelling tradition that significantly predates White. By reading White's landscapes after Wright's, the very notion of a settler landscape legacy is complicated and problematised. As symbols that have appeared throughout Australian literature, the desert and dump have often represented the nation as an empty void or container of waste, by turns convict, colonial, and consumerist. Once wastelands, for Wright and White these terrains emblematise both the richness of the natural

world and human mistreatment of it. In this way, each author responds to and celebrates a shared material environment, suggesting that Indigenous and settler landscape traditions are distinct, but no longer unconnected. As well as offering up poetic encounters with the material land, however, literary portraits of the desert and the dump convey cultural judgements about value. From how the land is used, the kinds of relationships characters have with it, and approaches to waste and profligacy, a comparative reading of the desert and dump showcases significant points of confluence and departure in the fiction of Wright and White. Far from suggesting a quixotic conclusion in which Indigenous and settler traditions of writing the land might be reconciled through an appreciation of Australian nature, the parallels between Wright's and White's portrayal of the desert and the dump are used to foreground troubled colonial lineages in the context of Australian literature and its environments.

Close readings of desert ecologies, cultural attitudes to the interior, and responses to the sacred wilderness underline significant affinities between Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* and Patrick White's *Voss*. In both novels, deserts are celebrated as local and diverse biomes and culturally, even spiritually, significant sites. In contrast to the history of settler depictions of the desert, the terrains of Wright and White celebrate Australia's so-called "dry zones" as vibrant and dynamic places, often teeming with life and water. For Wright and White, the desert—a so-called wasteland of *Terra Australis*—is in fact a biodiverse and dynamic space offering refuge and metaphysical transformation. But such similarities also accentuate their deepest ideological and ontological divisions. For example, in both *Voss* and *Carpentaria* the desert is an escape from—and even rebuke of—Western civilisation, but these commonalities are driven by different motives and standpoints. Voss traverses the desert hoping to test the limits of his will and eventually achieve spiritual redemption. Wright's own desert visionary Mozzie Fishman is spiritually driven and equally vulnerable to flights of hubris, but his connection to place is steeped in ancestry, community, knowledge of the land, and its offering

of a physical fortress against colonial settlement. Voss's journey is highly individual and his connection to place arises by simply visiting it, while the greatest threat he faces is becoming beholden to the status quo. In other words, the greatest fear channelled through White's landscapes is that the settler state is fated to become materially comfortable and intellectually complacent—a relatively shallow fear compared to the threat of personal and social destruction.

In the second section of Chapter Four on the dumps of Wright and White, two key and enlightening areas of difference and confluence emerge: namely, the kind of space offered by the dump and the centrality of regeneration. In *Carpentaria*, the dump is an abiding homeland. Its location and attributes shift, but the rubbish tip remains a site of identification and return for many of Wright's characters. As well as being a site for the material and ideological off-casts of colonialism, the dump is part of a homeland that predates invasion. In contrast, the dumps of Patrick White's fiction, appearing briefly in *Riders in the Chariot* (1961) and developed further in his subsequent short story "Down at the Dump" (1964), are thoroughfares. Far from mere passageways, however, White's dumps are sites of personal and creative metamorphosis for his settler and Indigenous characters. Despite his apparent intention to include the land's Traditional Owners in his vision of Australian environments, White's characterisation repeatedly falls short, and his Indigenous characters are cast through tropes that ultimately serve Western ideologies and claims on the land. In the rubbish tips of both Wright and White, however, nature is resurgent. Undeterred by invasion, industrialisation, or climatic disaster, the natural world inevitably flourishes even in the dark and dank dump. While environmental resilience is a shared and abiding theme of both authors, it typically supports very different claims. In the end, White's visions of environmental resilience and settler transformation in the desert and dump are part of a

national, mythmaking project. In contrast, Wright's deserts and dumps are local visions of planetary significance.

The final chapter on Alexis Wright and Patrick White raised promising areas of future research. White's name is often invoked in the discussion of Australian literature, and in review culture as a tool to situate other authors. In this way, White has a cultural function as an arbiter of value. Analysing this praxis might uncover different ways to understand and talk about White in relation to current critical trends and writers. As an extension of the sections on comparison and legacy in Chapter Four, I would like to explore further the rhetorical tool of comparison, the assignment of literary value in Australia, and White's cultural function. By undertaking a literature review of critical comparisons that invoke Patrick White's name, future research in this area might establish a sense of his cultural value and purpose, raising awareness of the kinds of practices that are really taking place in joint discussions of White and other authors.

The term landscape, rather than nature or environment, was specifically chosen for this thesis because at its heart the word contains an acknowledgement of its own artifice. When we are talking about "Australian" land, we are talking about landscapes, and in Patrick White's fiction they are clearly culturally coded. White's landscape legacy is multilayered and complex, and given his canonical status, reverberates beyond his own oeuvre. It recalls colonial history, settler traditions, environmentalism, Indigenous land rights, and over two hundred years of cultural and environmental entanglement between colonisers and Traditional Owners. By considering the strength of Patrick White's environmental vision, its denouement across his oeuvre, and its afterlives in writers like David Malouf and Alexis Wright, the key elements of his landscape legacy emerge. Like the author, his legacy is paradoxical and complex: at once hopeful, troubled, compassionate, racist, radical, conservative, narrow, and

expansive. This legacy remains central to contemporary settler accounts of the Australian environment. Crucially, Patrick White is not some villainous oddity from yesteryear, but emblematic of many default tropes, ways of thinking, and approaches to nature endemic in settler relationships with Australian land. Precisely because White's fiction is as troubled as it is representative, his legacy is critical to understanding both the history and future of settler representations of antipodean nature.

Figures

Figure 1. "Portrait of a Young Man" by Hans Memling

Figure 1. Memling, Hans. *Portrait of a Young Man*. Met Museum, 1472-55, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/459054.

Figure 2. "The Great Pool" by Jacob van Ruisdael, 1652

Figure 2. Ruisdael, Jacob van. "The Great Pool." Newfields, Indianapolis, 1652, collection.imamuseum.org/artwork/56808/.

Figure 3. Hand-drawn map by Colin Roderick

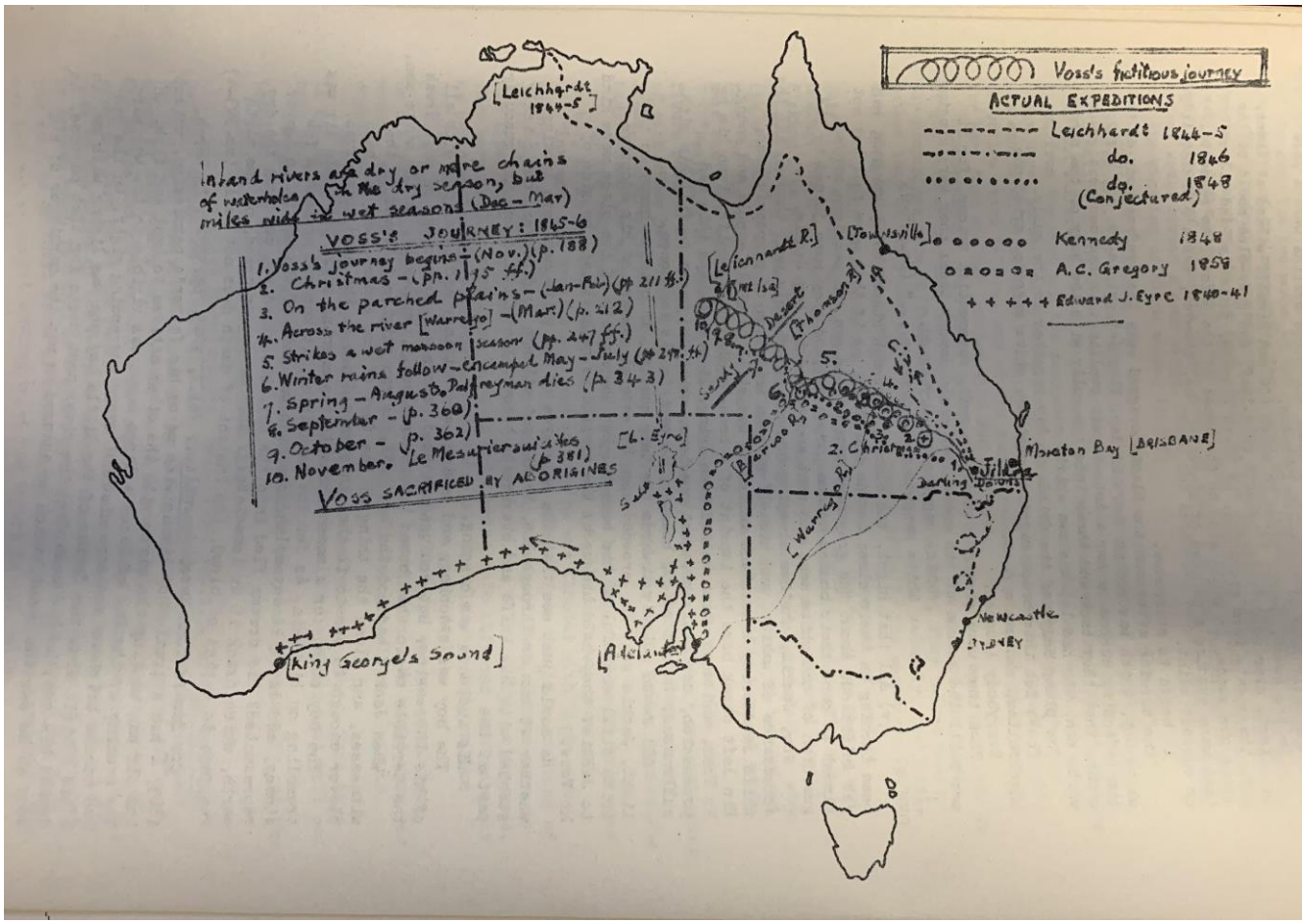

Figure 3. Roderick, Colin. "Lecture Notes." Ross Smith Room, Building 4, James Cook University, Bebegu Yumba Campus.

Figure 4. Patrick White's Study with Gethsemane, 1973

Figure 4. Marr, David. "Fragments & Furies." *The Sydney Morning Herald.* March 24, 2012, https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/books/fragments--furies-20120322-1vktf.html.

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