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A colonising paradox: White presencing and contamination politics in the Australian white-vanishing trope

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This article uses critical discourse analysis to deconstruct popular white Australian mythology about becoming lost in the bush. The analysis shows that the well-known tales of lost white children, women, explorers, drovers, and other variants of what is here termed "white-vanishing mythology", are neither neutral nor natural, but socially constructed and politically instrumental. In particular, these tales create and regulate forms of whiteness that are hegemonic, exclusive and conformist. This article details the ways in which whiteness is structured, marked and policed, and points to the strategic uses of such a delimiting for the maintenance of a racialised hyper-separation that underpins Australian colonialism. Loaded with binarised discourses of race, civility and belonging, white-vanishing mythology is exposed as a potent discursive weapon of colonialism and neo-colonialism. The trope's continuing popularity for contemporary migrant-coloniser writers indicates that racialised, colonialist thinking remains deeply and insistently embedded in white Australian culture.

> [I]f we are to be adequate critics of whiteness, we must become as educated about the history of colonialism, worldwide, as we are trying to become about the history of racism (Frankenberg 2001: 418).
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> The colonial state did not merely aspire to create, under its control, a human landscape of perfect visibility; the condition of this 'visibility' was that everyone, everything, had (as it were) a serial number (Anderson 1991: 184-5).

This article examines the strategies of whiteness and white belonging performed by the Australian lost-in-the-bush myth, here termed the

'white-vanishing' myth. The myth—comprising the numerous stories of vulnerable white people disappearing into the (constructed as) harsh Australian landscape—is examined critically, to illuminate its predominant location within non-Indigenous culture, and its enduring function, within that culture, as a racialised colonialist discourse.

The lost-in-the-landscape motif has long been acknowledged as a particularly Australian obsession (although less frequently recognised as a peculiarly *white* Australian obsession) (see Hamer 1955; Heseltine 2000; Pierce 1999; Torney 2005). Yet despite more than half a century of interest in the trope, cultural critics have not yet answered the most obvious question: *why* does it reoccur obsessively? This article argues that the white-vanishing myth is in fact a deceptive and strategic colonial textual paradox—more than anything else, it is actually a narrative of white presence, rather than absence—and that this presencing function helps explain its lasting attraction to white Australian writers and audiences.[1]

Three concepts from critical postcolonial studies provide a guiding theoretical framework for the analysis throughout this article. The first is the concept of "hyper-separation", as coined by Plumwood (2003: 54), to describe the process of "defining the dominant identity emphatically against, or in opposition to, the subordinated identity, by exclusion of their real or supposed qualities". The second concept is Pratt's "anti-conquest", that is, "a strategy of representation whereby European bourgeois subjects seek to secure their innocence in the same moment as they assert European hegemony" (1992: 7). The third concept, closely related to the second, is White's (1985) notion of the "counter-instance": an aberrant discursive event that actually services (providing a foil and prompt) an opposing and more dominant discourse. When the familiar literary, cinematic and other white-vanishing tales that litter non-Indigenous Australian culture[2] are examined through the critical lens provided by

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[1] In this article, 'white Australia' refers to the dominant set of nationalised cultural images and identities perpetrated and naturalised in the name of all Australians. As Gibson points out, while "the colony is a diverse collection of ethnic and interest groups … it is also unified by its shared 'rebirth' in the 'new' environment" (1992: 69). Accordingly, use of 'white' in this article follows the lead of critical whiteness scholars who see the white subject as interchangeable with the migrant-coloniser. That is, whiteness is understood as what Anderson (1991) would term an 'imagined community', encompassing "any non-Indigenous subject in the Australian context, and any sense of belonging to this country that this white subject can enjoy" (Ravenscroft 2004: 3).

[2] The lost white person occurs in multiple genres of white Australian culture. Just a few examples include: the song "Little Boy Lost" (J. Ashcroft 1960); the film of that name released in 1978 (Bourke); the film *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (Weir 1975); Henry Lawson's poems of lost (always white) tramps (1964); the many romanticised tales of Leichhardt or Burke and Wills wandering in mad circles (e.g. Charnley 1954; Fitchett 1938); Patrick White's lost explorer novel *Voss* (1957); dramatic treatments such as Janis Balodis' *The Ghosts Trilogy* (1997); and even an operatic treatment, in David Malouf's reworking of *Voss* as a libretto (1986). There have been two prominent books on the lost-child phenomenon alone (Pierce 1999; Torney 2005), although lost children are but one small strand of the overall

these concepts, their figures of the 'lost child', 'lost stockman', or 'lost schoolgirl' become recognisable not only as narrative emblems that capture the white Australian imagination by performing potent fantasies of white innocence, victimhood and heroism in Australian space, but also as part of a discourse that polices and regulates the parameters of whiteness in ways that are hegemonic, conformist and anti-individualistic. Entwined with the process of performing a colonialist strategy of white belonging, white-vanishing mythology also enacts, through its deployment of hyper-separation, boundaries for whiteness itself.

A familiar narrative

The sequence by which discursive definition and surveillance of white subjectivity are achieved in white-vanishing texts is quite standard across the trope, to the extent that such narratives are now familiar, even predictable, in their appeal to and reinforcement of particular discursive patterns. The lost-in-the-bush tale has become a stock cliché of white Australian culture. Typically, the discursive sequence is as follows: first, there is an explicit assertion of racialised whiteness for key characters, using white-associated physical, cultural or symbolic features. Usually this assertion of whiteness is made for the about-to-vanish protagonist, but sometimes other members of their community are also marked explicitly with whiteness. Next, there is a threatened erosion of that whiteness through metaphors of physical or psychological taint. Then, a white character vanishes. Finally, one of two possible outcomes occurs. The vanished character may be recovered alive and triumphantly restored to the white community, implying a correction to the taint—they and/or other tainted whites have learned, through the vanishing trauma, to understand and appreciate the limits of their white subjectivity, and have retreated from those limits, to be redeemed as wholly white. Often class and gender-bound mores such as mateship and monogamy are also reinforced in this process. Alternatively, the vanished character may be lost forever, through death or complete disappearance. In this case, those who remain behind take implicit or explicit warning against transgression from the traumatic loss of one of their own.

In all the white-vanishing texts, the transgression that is punished is not only one of spatialisation, of wandering from the path, but one of identification. Whether vanished characters return or not, the texts establish clear discursive barriers against the infringement of white-settler social norms, especially by 'going native'. These texts bear out Ashcroft's definition of colonial 'going native' anxieties as focused more on the fear of discovering sameness with the Indigene than fear of discovering difference (B. Ashcroft 1998). They enact what McGregor calls a "boundary management" (2003: para. 1), in which an explicitly racialised clarification occurs and the limits of acceptable whiteness are defined and redrawn.

white-vanishing theme. For many more examples from a diverse range of genres and historical periods, see Tilley 2007.

Such regulation inevitably asserts hegemonic controls over white individuals in a variety of ways, resulting in acquiescence to dominant white values of class, gender, race or some combination of these. Yet, although a strident boundary management discourse without doubt has some oppressive effects for some white subjects (for example women—see Tilley 2007), ultimately, it is fundamentally a colonialist mechanism of anti-conquest. The process of expressing anxiety about the stability of white subjectivities actually shores up those subjectivities and reinforces the borders of their whiteness. Hybridity, flexibility or adaptation in any form (cultural, racial, psychological) are utterly rejected in the service of a colonialist master-narrative of hyper-separation that cements and legitimises white occupation. When these texts are examined critically, white-vanishing events are inexorably revealed as the counter-instances of a dominant discourse of white presencing in which communities band together in a common understanding of what it means to be white. The next sections of this article examine and illustrate in turn the steps, as outlined above, in this clichéd sequence: whiteness, threat and correction.

Whiteness

As noted above, the typical discursive structure of a white-vanishing tale begins with an overt assertion of racialised whiteness, usually for the vanishing protagonist, and sometimes also for members of their community. These are white-vanishing tales first and foremost because those who vanish are explicitly marked as white. The white-vanishing trope illustrates Ingram's assertion that, in settler texts, "whiteness is not portrayed as unraced, transparent, or neutral, but rather is racialized or marked" (2001: 157). The markers include skin, hair, eyes, lips, clothing, body shape, language and even posture, gestures and gait. Such marking is usually constructed as positive: with only a few recent exceptions, whiteness symbolises a categorical 'good' in these texts.

Markers of whiteness are most obvious in popular fiction examples of lost-in-the-bush tales. For example, in "A Little Rebel" (a 1916 story for children in *Town and Country Journal*), the lost child Trixy is "divinely fair, with ... a cream-white skin" (Yeo 1916: 4). Similarly, Parkes (writing as Sekrap) describes the child in her story as "fair haired, with blue eyes" (1879: 220), while the lost child in Ogilvie's "Old Jack", is simply "the golden-haired boy" (1906: 15). Teenaged Miranda, the main vanishing protagonist in Lindsay's *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, is a "pale girl with straight yellow hair" (1967: 28). The semiosis of whiteness continues in 1998, with Miller's vanished child also a "golden-haired boy" (1998: 123).

Not all vanishing protagonists are fair-haired, but where eye colour is mentioned, and it frequently is, it is usually blue. In *Paving the Way*, Joan Grantley (who later becomes lost in the bush and dies) and her sister have "pretty blue eyes, rounded chins and rosy complexions" (Newland [1893] 2002: 91). Likewise, Furphy's (possibly parodic) Mary O'Halloran has "something almost amusing in the strong racial index of her pure Irish face" ([1903] 1997: 86). Mary's eyes are "of indescribable blue" (86) and

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repeated references are made to her "deep-blue eyes and a skin of extreme whiteness" (87).

Not all constructions of whiteness are literally embodied. Furphy underscores the imagery of Mary's white skin with additional symbolism expressed in clothing. She dresses in "a vast, white sunbonnet" when we first meet her (85) and later a "long white garment" (88). Many of the other lost females in the catalogue of Australian white vanishing are likewise conspicuously clothed in white. The white nightgown of Emily, the lost child in the movie *One Night the Moon* (Perkins 2001), glows with an intense, luminous whiteness created through bleach-bypass processing of the film (Millard 2001).[3] Lindsay's picnicking schoolgirls all wear white muslin dresses, in both book and film. The white clothing transfers racial connotations to the wearer: Michael, seeing Miranda's white dress in the distance, perceives her as a white (i.e. imported European) swan (1967: 28).

In some stories, the very whiteness of European garments helps searchers find lost characters. In "The Tale of the Mountain Moss", Ellie and Johnnie are only saved because "Ellie's apron gleamed white" (Moth 1879: 23), and the "fluttering apron" is a "better guide than his feeble cry" (23). In "Little Daisy", searchers are too late to save the lost child, but her white clothing enables her father to find his daughter's body when "something white fluttering in the breeze attracted their attention" (Ex Capite 1888: 917). In Adam-Smith's rendition of the popular Duff children lost-in-the-bush narrative, the desperate father had almost abandoned the search when he "saw something white a little distance away—it was Jane in her petticoat" (1981: 149). These romanticised spotless white garments, like their wearers' white skins, are loaded with symbolism relating to cleanliness, innocence and 'proper' civilised attire and behaviour, as well as to gender and class. Kociumbas, describing mid-nineteenth-century children's fashions among the colonial elite, observes that women and girls often wore flimsy white dresses, which "taught them the importance of the image of feminine fragility, dependence and purity and also signalled that

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[3] To label *One Night* a "white-vanishing" text is not to deny the Indigenous identity and perspective of director Rachel Perkins who, although joining the project after its initial conception, worked collaboratively with a range of contributors to bring the project to fruition and shape its final form, but rather to suggest that a text can enact discourses that are entirely separate from its authors' identities. Like any white-vanishing text, *One Night* inherits traces of the prior versions of the myth, and these are part of its meaning-making context. For example, *One Night* is strongly reminiscent of Mary Gilmore's poem "A Little Ghost". In Gilmore's text, the ghost of a lost child is led by moonlight over the creaking floor of her room and "across a narrow plain" (1907: 228). The "moonlight leads her" (228) and as she follows it, "curlews wake, and wailing cry … Till all the Bush, with nameless dread, Is pulsing through and through" (229). The ghost-girl herself "moves her lips, but not a sound Ripples the silent air" (228). All of these semiotic elements are present in *One Night*, in which a silent girl likewise follows the moonlight, gliding ghostlike across a narrow plain to the sound of curlew cry. Anti-conquest ideological elements, of an innocent white victim lured by a luminous force into dreadful nature, are also inescapably paralleled, meaning that the dominant ideological structure of the movie is, like other retellings of the white-vanishing myth, discursively shaped by broader cultural currents.

their families had servants to care for such garments" (1997: 67). Jane's white petticoat, visible because, in the mythology of the Duff children as it entered popular folklore, she has selflessly removed her darker over-skirt to cover her sleeping brothers, signals her idealised civil social behaviour in caring, like a little mother, for her brothers. Her heroism (and that of the community in searching tirelessly) saves all the children's lives. As will be discussed in more detail below, finding the whiteness (whether clothing, bodily, or social) helps resolve or remove these narratives' tensions about threatened loss of white racial and cultural purity in colonial contexts.

Less overtly 'popular' white-vanishing narratives, while usually more subtle, also tend to position their lost or vanished characters as explicitly white. For example, Malouf's lost character Gemmy, who is washed overboard and lives with "blacks" for 16 years in *Remembering Babylon*, is initially recognised as white by settlers because of his hair, "sun-bleached and pale-straw coloured as their own" (1993: 3). He is then confirmed in his whiteness by non-physical properties such as his vestiges of English language and, importantly, the tattered remnants of European clothing around his waist.

In the majority of white-vanishing narratives, whiteness symbolises wholesomeness, acceptability, or the means through which rescue occurs. Gemmy's blonde hair, for example, is initially his passport to reacceptance into the white community. In a handful of other recent white-vanishing texts, whiteness is more ambivalent. The two middle-aged men who vanish in Astley's *Vanishing Points* are unambiguously white, yet an irony about that whiteness has entered the narrative: both are explicitly "too white". One has "too white skin that never tanned" (1992: 5), and the other a "face too white for the climate they were moving in" (23). Their whiteness makes them unsuited to Australia's environment, yet ultimately that unsuitability is actually celebrated—their sunburn marks them as "*gloriously* alien" (5; emphasis added).

Tainted whiteness

If the whiteness of vanishing characters is always highly visible, even over-determined, it is also always threatened or compromised in some way. The second discursive aspect of white subjects in Australian white-vanishing texts is their exploration of the possible erosion of whiteness through metaphors of taint (again, usually-but-not-always applying to the vanishing character). Working dialectically against these texts' declarative iterations of whiteness as a visually marked racial presence, are iterations of whiteness itself being endangered, displaced, or weakened, through metaphors of stain, contamination, ebb, or decline.

The vanishing protagonists, although undeniably white, are also always in some way not-white. They are changed by contact with their Australian surroundings in a way that constructs them as now having entered into a process of defilement—that is, of becoming imperfectly white. If we understand "defilement" in Kristeva's sense, as "an element connected with the boundary, the margin, etc., of an order" (1982: 66), this imagery

of taint both signals and enacts a politics of separation and boundary management. Changes to the white form, character, or physical body in the Australian environment are not represented in the white-vanishing narratives as positive signals of flexibility and adaptation, but most often as deterioration or degradation that must be resisted, overcome, or destroyed. The protagonists who vanish are typically what Dixon calls "bastard types" (1995: 64). That is members of a "dangerous and unstable hierarchy" of flawed, damaged, and contaminated grotesques or hybrids of whiteness that spring up in colonial contact zones as anxieties about the loss of an (imaginary) original English form of whiteness are explored.

Colonial anxieties about degeneration were encapsulated in Turner's 'frontier thesis' (written in 1893 and first published in 1920), which argued, in the North American context, that a new environment changes settlers' dominant characteristics as a group (F. J. Turner 1935). The same idea appears in the Australian context in Ward's conception of the laconic, 'rough and ready' battler as a response to the particular characteristics of the Australian 'bush' (in R. Lawson 1980). It is also inherent in concerns, as expressed by visiting author Anthony Trollope in 1853, about whether "the [imagined white Australian] race will deteriorate or become stronger by the change" (in Dalziell 2004: 5). The white-vanishing texts' explorations of taint reflect these kinds of anxieties, as well as more direct fears of racial deterioration through miscegenation. Schaffer has commented on the power of captivity narratives "as a genre to articulate in mythic terms the fear of miscegenation" (1993: 4). In the Australian context, in which Schaffer argues that "the captivity narrative makes no sense [because] … (n)ew inhabitants were not taken captive" (11), settler fears about miscegenation, contamination and the instability of categories of racial difference appear to have instead found expression in the related trope of white vanishing. White-vanishing texts use the symbolism of taint to reconstitute and regulate an order of racialised whiteness.

Perhaps the most visible sense in which vanished characters are marked as losing their whiteness is through changes to their skin. Many have skin that, although still explicitly white, signals with patches or tints of 'not-white' that they are less 'pure' in their whiteness. Clarke describes lost child Pretty Dick's skin as "white as milk", but it is also now sun-tanned "golden brown" below the cuff-line ([1869] 1976: 557). In near-identical imagery, Warner, writing in *The Australian Town and Country Journal*'s children's corner section (compiled by Ethel Turner), notes that lost child Willie "clasped his little brown hands and lifted his white face" (1911: 32). Likewise Gaunt's lost-adult character Jenny is "fair" ([1894] 2003: 109), but the line where her "sun-tan ended showed as a dark ring round her white neck" (4). Similarly, the found child in M.C.'s (Catherine Martin's) "Silent Jim" has a "sun-browned face" (1874: 26), but lest readers should mistake her for a found black child, repeated references to her blondeness—"sunny hair" (27), "sunny head" (28) and "fair brow" (28)—emphasise her white identity. In *Remembering Babylon*, beneath his blonde hair, Gemmy's face has been "scorched black" (Malouf 1993: 3).

The same combination of darkened skin with residual whiteness occurs in Thrower's novel *Younah* (1894), about a white child who becomes lost and

lives with Indigenes[4] in Tasmania. Martin notes that the lost white child's "bush skills and closeness to indigeneity are mapped on her body ('the natural fairness of her skin had deepened into an almost brunette like tint, by reason of continued exposure to the open air')" (2001: 155). The changes are superficial: when the white child is found and "restored" to white society, her "femininity and class are clearly legible" in her facial features, posture and gait, even "after years in the supposed wilderness" (2001: 155).

Managing contamination

In the texts discussed above, skin taint has been obtained vicariously from the environment; in other white-vanishing texts, it is explicitly obtained from actual contact with the Indigene. When the lost child Babs, in *Norah of Billabong* (Bruce 1913), is located in the bush, a "dark stain covered the child's face and its legs and arms" (230), as though the skin colour of "Black Lucy", the Indigene accused of kidnapping her, has somehow rubbed off onto the white child. Nonetheless, like Younah's still-legible physical markers of class and gender civility, Babs's original whiteness is visible in her physical form: she has "pretty … slender" feet and a "high … instep" (224). To the white searchers, these characteristics are conspicuously inconsistent with her dark skin because, as one declares, "I've never seen a darky with a foot like that … They're all just as flat-footed as a—a platypus" (224-5). Now the searchers look more closely and, contradicting the stain, Babs's facial "features were those of the baby who had laughed to them from the blue wall of the little room at Mrs. Archdale's" (230).

Babs's behaviour also confirms that she 'belongs' with whiteness: "there was no fear in the wide, dark eyes that met theirs—but rather an unspoken greeting, as though instinct told her that she was once more among her own kind" (230). As also occurs in *Younah*, a ritualised washing takes place, to remove the visible tinge of Babs's contact with Lucy. After the washing, Babs has undergone a transformation that—as McClintock (1995) has documented in a range of colonial texts that use the washing metaphor to skirt unpresentable issues of miscegenation and deracination—constructs the change as much more than just surface cleanliness:

> [T]he soap was at a low ebb and the ammonia bottle empty before they made little Babs Archdale clean. All the child's skin was stained with some dark juice and grimed with the dirt of long months; but it yielded to the scrubbing, and Babs emerged from the final rinsing water a very different

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[4] The term 'Indigene' in this article refers not to any actual Indigenous person or peoples but to the homogenised fantasy image of the generic Indigenous Other that is constructed within white textuality. Goldie (1989) argues that the white image of the Indigene is detached from and has no relationship to the plurality and diversity within and between groups of Indigenous peoples. In white texts, he argues, 'Indigene' is not a signifier that represents Indigenous peoples, but a mythic sign fabricated within white culture, projected outwards, and superimposed over Indigenous worlds.

being from the grubby piccaninny who had gone in—the white skin of her shining little body a startling contrast to the deep sun-brown of her face and arms and legs (Bruce 1913: 235-6).

Plumwood points out (2003: 54) that, as part of hyper-separation discourse, "Colonizers exaggerate differences—for example, through emphasizing exaggerated cleanliness, 'civilized' or 'refined' manners, body covering, or alleged physiological differences between what are defined as separate races". The washed Babs has become "a very different being" (Bruce 1913: 236) from the unwashed Babs: in this way, the text's governing discourse performs a fundamental denial of the sameness of white and Indigene (they are of a different 'kind'). This is an example of white-vanishing mythology constructing and maintaining the "forms of difference" that Bhabha sees as crucial to "the construction of the colonial subject in discourse and the exercise of colonial power through discourse" (1994: 67). Babs's transition from one world to another is marked by an absolute change: in one world, she is a 'piccaninny'; in the other, she is a human. Through these kinds of absolute oppositions, white-vanishing texts disrupt any possibility of connection or merging between the hyper-separated worlds of the text (the worlds of own kind and Other). When a character strays from their own kind to become lost in the world of the Other (nature, bush, Indigene), it is staged as a rupture—a *vanishing* from one world to the other—and figured as a trauma that threatens the white world's order of things and needs to be cleaned up.

Another lost-child novel, *Manganinnie* (Roberts 1979), uses similar imagery of trauma and restoration. In the film of Roberts' novel (Honey 1980), which was watched by generations of Tasmanian schoolchildren as part of their English curriculum, sentimental scenes in which the lost white child Joanna is reunited with her brother, sanitised with steaming water and vigorous towelling, and reinstated to European dress and appearance, imply a correction to the disequilibrium of the earlier narrative in which Joanna lived with an Aboriginal woman, Manganinnie, while her white family grieved for her (represented particularly in anti-conquest visual images of the bereft, anguished white mother as tragic victim).

This sense of restored order (despite or indeed because of the sadness with which Joanna ascribes her now-lost 'shared' time with Manganinnie to the unrecoverable past) writes out any possibility of a continuing disequilibrium in which Joanna and her family acknowledge their status as members of the occupation force that has dispossessed Manganinnie. Innocent, harmless, devoted, and compassionate Joanna is not a figure through whom settler complicity in white society's unlawful presence and (non-successful) genocidal activities in Tasmania can easily be explored. Rather, as Goldie describes: "through the indigene the white character gains soul and the potential of becoming rooted in the land" (1988: 69). The text has Joanna approach Indigeneity but reject it, taking away from the encounter only a deepened sense of her own belonging in the country Manganinnie has shown her.

In *Remembering Babylon*, Gemmy undergoes a washing that matches Joanna's and Babs's—although it is less successful from the story's white

settlers' point-of-view. Gemmy's racial degeneration is marked with an odour of decay that clings to him despite baths and clean clothes provided by a white woman:

> For all the scrubbing with raw soap, and the soft woollen shirts and moleskins Ellen McIvor had found for him, and washed with her own hands, he had kept the smell he came with, which was the smell of the myall, half-meat, half-mud, a reminder, a depressing one, of what there might be in him that could not be reclaimed (Malouf 1993: 41).

Again, the rituals of cleansing and cleaning allude to issues of racial delineation. The settlers believe that Gemmy had "started out white. No question" (Malouf 1993: 40). Yet now, "when you looked at him sometimes he was not white. His skin might be but not his features. The whole cast of his face gave him the look of one of Them" (40). When Gemmy cannot be 'cleaned', the text ultimately manages his threat of contamination in another way—he is returned to the bush and vanishes again, permanently.

Remembering Babylon also metaphorises racial defilement in another way that is common to the white-vanishing trope more broadly: through images of physical taint or "damage" (Malouf 1993: 7). The white community reads the physical changes written onto Gemmy's body by his encounter with the Other as a spoiling or degeneration of their imagined ideal white type: he is now "misshapen" (7), with "the mangy, half-starved look of a black" (3). Clearly, these metaphors of racial characteristics leaching in or out through proximity with the Indigene allude to fears of miscegenation as racial degradation.

Busia has commented that, in non-Indigenous postcolonial literature, "Sex between the races is never [portrayed as] a good thing" (1986: 367). She argues that, in white texts, "without exception, when it takes place, it is an unhealthy relationship with dire consequences" (367). In particular the "fruits" of such unions are marked, literally and symbolically, as flawed. They are "frequently the most morally degenerate of beings: villainous, treacherous, manipulative degenerates who … manage to inherit both the most repulsive physical and spiritual traits of their parents" (367). Gemmy is perceived as just such a degenerate by the white settlers. His adaptations are seen as evidence not of flexibility but of duplicity and malevolence. He "*was* a white man" (Malouf 1993: 3, emphasis added) but is now a black *pretending* to be white. He is the mimic man, "a parody of a white man … imitation gone wrong" (Malouf 1993: 39).

Other white-vanishing texts even more clearly associate miscegenation with 'damaged' white characters. In Astley's *Vanishing Points*, for example, the character Estelle Pellatier [sic] traces her lineage both to the lost white French boy Narcisse Pelletier, shipwrecked in northern Australia in 1858, and to the Aboriginal tribespeople who rescued and adopted him (1992: 71-2). Estelle's damage is written onto her face, in the form of an indelible stain: "She was disfigured by a birthmark blotching the corner of one eye and clouding the upper curve of cheek" (Astley 1992: 27).

Resolving taint: a didactic role

Some white-vanishing texts are less explicit in signalling physical damage as racial degeneration, yet still perform a semiosis of taint via physical or psychological infirmity or lapse. The un-whitening of Jenny's skin in Gaunt's text, for example, is matched by the extent to which she is also approaching a state of not-white behaviour. Mirroring the infantilising representations of Indigenes in these texts (Tilley 2007), Jenny is portrayed as child-like, with a "half-developed mind" (Gaunt [1894] 2003: 85). She is "a little simple, perhaps" (99). She is also "wild about Black Anderson" (99), a criminal and outcast who represents the fearful yet desirable Other. The descriptions of Anderson do not confirm that he is racially black (it seems rather a reference to his bushy black beard) but Jenny's attraction to him nonetheless symbolises her asymptotic[5] approach to the Other, which is to be understood as a deterioration on her part from the ideals of her society.

The white-vanishing texts offer only two options for resolution of their characters' dangerous approaches towards alterity: the tainted white must either be rescued and redeemed, or if they are too contaminated from their contact with the Other to be symbolically or literally washed clean, they must stay vanished or perish. Simple Jenny does not know better than to become deeply involved with Black Anderson. Too fascinated with his otherness to permit the possibility of rescue and redemption, she pays the ultimate price (death and permanent vanishing) for her dalliance.

Similar suggestions of character flaw or psychological inadequacy are prominent throughout the white-vanishing narratives, both for those who become lost and for the members of their families or communities. Mortimer argues that white American captivity-narrative protagonists invariably "resisted sin and physical and spiritual corruption until rescued" (2000: 12). The behaviour of white Australian captives and vanished protagonists immersed in the space of the Other is often far more ambivalent, suggesting a cultural difference between the two societies. Overall, however, the didactic purpose of the tales is the same: to teach, whether by model or warning, conformity to norms of difference and separation by race, class and gender.

Sometimes in Australian white-vanishing tales, the semiosis of taint or imperfection extends beyond individuals to attach to white society as a whole. Vanishing characters are frequently 'bastards' in a literal as well as figurative sense, with disputed parentage and fractured family situations preceding or precipitating a white vanishing. Many of the white-vanishing narratives allude to crumbling white social structures: implied social 'decay' often provides the disequilibrium that results in (and then is redressed by) a white vanishing. Hamer first observed in 1955 that lost children in Australian literature usually had absent or disrupted parentage

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[5] See Alan Lawson (2000; 2004) for a discussion of asymptosis (drawing near but never connecting) as a colonialist discursive trope.

detailed in the narrative.[6] Often a fundamental disruption to the patriarchal norms of marriage and nuclear family foreshadows vanishing: absence of an ideal mother is a particularly frequent precipitating factor. For example, "Little Daisy" in Ex Capite's 1888 story is prompted to run away after her mother's death, Edwards' lost child Una goes missing while her mother is sick (1909: 16), and Yeo's Trixy has lived with her godfather since age four, when her mother died. Her father has been on business in England for five years, during which time the godfather has "spoiled her to her heart's content" (1916: 4).

In Moth's "The Tale of the Mountain Moss" (1879), the fundamental disruption outlined in the opening paragraph is the father's drunkenness. Although he is now sober, the family has been marked from the story's outset as flawed and therefore vulnerable. Bill Trickett, the father of "Little Liz" who is lost in Farjeon's *Shadows on the Snow*, although now exemplary in his devotion to Liz, is also flawed. He "had come to the colony under a cloud" (1877: 83), and soon after arriving, his wife dies, leaving him to care for baby Liz in the 'unsuitable' masculine environment of the goldfields.

All of these narratives suggest defects in the desired fabric of white society, defects that directly or indirectly cause a white character to vanish. Quickly, though, these defects are sutured by each narrative's presentation and resolution of a vanishing event. The white-vanishing texts 'solve' grotesques either by ejecting and erasing them through permanent vanishing, or by redeeming them and their communities through their valiant and united responses to vanishing in rescue missions. The vanishing episode is invariably used to reclaim 'bastard types'—among both vanishing and non-vanishing characters—from the brink of their final transgression to otherness, and restore them to their 'proper' roles in an explicitly gender- and class-ordered white society. The white-vanishing trope is, in effect, a textual strategy for mopping up—disposing, containing, or retraining—any uncontrolled excess at the edges of white settler society. These texts perform, and manage, the fear that "in the colonies control of the reproduction of bourgeois values was seen to be directly threatened by race" (Coté 2009: para. 3).

The white-vanishing narratives' textual interplays between whiteness and non-whiteness, and explorations of physical and psychological defilement, reflect wider anxieties about change in settler society. In other late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century literary texts, 'currency' or so-called 'native born' first-generation white Australians have typically been portrayed as having largely white racial characteristics, but with environmental influences shaping psychological and physical changes. Meredith, for example, wrote in 1844 that currency children tended to "precocity of growth and premature decay" (50). Kociumbas (1997) notes pervasive social anxiety and uncertainty about the extent to which bodily

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[6] The literature Hamer discussed was exclusively *white* Australian literature, although as was common at the time he did not specify this. His point about parentage and his conflation of white Australian literature with all Australian literature were both repeated by Pierce (1999).

adaptations ascribed to currency children were positive or negative, and a reverse but related concern that physical or mental inflexibility in new settlers might prove to be a fatal deficiency.

Both the fetishisation of racial purity and the anxious fear of degeneration in white-vanishing texts suggest a repressed awareness, as Dalziell has identified in a different white-settler textual trope—the English-but-not-English "Australian Girl"—that "white European settlers are neither European nor white at all" (2004: 5). This doubt is articulated clearly in *Remembering Babylon.* Malouf's settlers fear not only the otherness they perceive in Gemmy but, by extension, the sameness with otherness that might be latent in themselves. Gemmy's non-white smell confronts them with "the smell in your own sweat, of a half-forgotten swamp-world going back deep in both of you" (Malouf 1993: 43).

This underlying anxiety about the validity and robustness of race itself as a category for ordering and dividing the world (and legitimising colonialism) undermines settlers' certainty about how to interpret the markers by which their identity is asserted in colonial contexts. In the white-vanishing texts, this anxiety finds expression in pervasive doubleness. Settlers are white-and-not-white at the same time: skin, body and 'being' alter, yet do not alter. Any blurring or contradiction, however, does not survive the unfolding of the white-vanishing event. The device of white vanishing always functions to remove uncertainty, contradiction and instability from the narrative. The white-vanishing trope performs—and simultaneously buttresses, avoids and denies—the fear articulated by Trollope that the whole category of racial difference might be unsustainable, and the social order and legitimacy of white society therefore at risk. Irredeemable boundary types disappear in these narratives, because if they remained they would, like other 'bastard' textual types, "undermine the stable identity of a (white) national self" (Dixon 1995: 66).

A colonising motive

Dixon argues that the "anxiety that English identity will be lost in Australia" is sometimes so intense that it finds expression in metaphors of complete absorption or consumption of settlers "by the hostile land and its savage inhabitants" (1995: 66). The white-vanishing trope, in this sense, is a sibling narrative to the trope of cannibalism. In both tropes, the white settler is constructed as literally consumed by the Other, a kind of manoeuvre that Curthoys calls settler victimology (2000). In victimological texts, macro circumstances of white privilege and inter-racial injustice are obscured with a micro-focus on whites as vulnerable and as sufferers. We see this in the emphasis, in white-vanishing texts, on the trauma of vanishing for lost people and their communities, and in the sense of vanishing's inevitability. Victims are helpless, depicted as powerless within a hostile and unknowable country. No attention is paid to culpability, to the knowledges that whites could learn about the country if they adopted a visitor stance and listened to its Indigenous owners for guidance.

In the white-vanishing trope, Indigenous presence is in fact multiply displaced, because an anthropomorphised 'hostile land' frequently stands in for the Indigene as the object held responsible for white characters' consumption by their surrounding environment. White-vanishing texts *always* simultaneously enact a white presencing that overrides the performed anxiety about absence. The trope can certainly be read as exploring and performing the "fundamental anxiety" that "when Englishness is lost there is nothing to replace it: that in Australia, nation, like the interior of the continent, is a nameless blank" (Dixon 1995: 72), but it is also a strategy for *blocking* deeper exploration of the root causes of that anxiety.

By way of example, it is useful to revisit a text that Dixon used to support his argument about anxiety, Favenc's *The Secret of the Australian Desert* (1895). Favenc loosely based his book on a search for vanished explorer Ludwig Leichhardt, and it contains a number of smaller white-vanishing incidents. In one of these, a white explorer vanishes down a hole in a cave. Dixon reads this textual moment as a "literal enactment" of "fear of absorption" by the Other (Dixon 1995: 79). The sense of dread felt by the exploration party at the loss of one of their own is, Dixon argues, a sense of the "imminent danger … of being devoured by barbarism" (79).

In one sense, Dixon is correct: Favenc's text explicitly articulates fear of being devoured, with the white explorers speculating that the Indigenes' mouths are "watering to see us roasting on the coals" (Favenc 1895: 69). On the other hand, it is worth noting that while this particular moment in the narrative expresses fear and anxiety about disappearance, overall the text resolves and placates this fear. It uses the larger white-vanishing premise (of Leichhardt's disappearance), as well as the several specific smaller white-vanishing episodes, not as enduring motifs of absence and loss but as counter-instances (White 1985) that service the text's more dominant discourse of white privilege and power. The vanishings ultimately serve to *negate* or *deflect* anxiety about the legitimacy, sustainability and permanence of white presence and create a sense of certainty about white imperviousness and collective progress that offers reassurance to an interpellated white readership.

In the case of the white explorer's disappearance down the cave, his loss immediately motivates a response of gallant mateship and white unity. These actions establish the white search-party's collective valour, pre-emptively endorsing them as deserving recipients of the riches and secrets they afterwards 'discover' in the land. Ultimately this is not a fearful text at all, but a text that is absolutely confident in naturalising "an attachment to a sense of white entitlement" (Frankenberg 2001: 421). Like other white-vanishing texts, having first established a sense of what it means to be white, then featuring a threat posed to that status, Favenc's text focuses on the whites' response to that threat and their restoration of the status quo. The narrative describes the whites' intellectual strategising as they assess their resources, formulate a plan and, by working together as "comrade[s]" (1895: 71) they are able to not only get their 'mate' out of the cave but also to overcome the much greater numbers of "cannibals" (75) who appear in his wake. One of the whites comments, "we must fight

for all we're worth" (74). That the whites' "worth" is to be understood as considerable (and that the Indigenes by contrast have no "worth") is evidenced when the land itself assists the whites in their fight. Just as the Indigenes begin to swarm out of the cave, there is a strangely isolated earthquake from which the whites are protected, but which collapses the cave, entombing all the Indigenes inside.

Thus although the land at first appeared intent on consuming the white, the situation is quickly reversed, with the land consuming the Indigene specifically so that whites can occupy the land. The tremor opens up new access to a path that leads the whites soon afterwards to the first "goal of their hopes" (Favenc 1895: 123), an inland lake that feeds lush pastures, and eventually on to the second goal, a "fabulously rich" reef of gold (185). This white-vanishing narrative's dominant textual effects are not to perpetuate anxiety and uncertainty, but to reinforce confidence and surety in the white race's "worth" and (therefore) destined status as naturalised inheritors of the landscape's riches (as they are understood within a capitalist economy that valorises pastoralism and mineral exploitation but has no concept of value as inherent in other kinds of relationships with land). The story offers on every level a discourse of white presencing, as do the many other white-vanishing tales in which lost victims are rescued by white communities who band together to overcome the conflated construct of land/Indigene.[7]

Permanent vanishing

Of course, triumphant rescue is not always the outcome in white-vanishing narratives. Trollope's anxiety about racial robustness *might* have its ultimate expression in narratives in which white subjects not only "deteriorate", but vanish altogether into the new environment. If "colonialism involves the erosion of an originary Englishness that will not necessarily be replaced by a mature colonial identity, leaving a vacancy" (Dixon 1995: 64), white-vanishing texts certainly provide opportunities to explore and express the fear of such a vacancy through the metaphor of white men, women and children first finding their whiteness compromised, then vanishing altogether. Yet, even when rescue does not occur, the

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[7] In discourses of hyper-separation, Indigenous peoples are often constructed as inseparable from the natural world—they are "'beasts of the forest', in contrast to the qualities of civilization and reason that are attributed to the colonizer" (Plumwood 2003: 54). In white-vanishing texts, the dichotomy does not always valorise coloniser over colonised: often coloniser is alienated, and Indigene is spiritual and grounded; sometimes coloniser is blind, and Indigene sees; but whichever way the value judgements are arranged, the dichotomy (the hyper-separation) remains. Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos argue that "modern Western racism is about excluding worlds. Racism, understood as a matter of the exclusion of the Other as-a-world, is at the heart of claims that there are incommensurable experiences and irreducible differences" (2004: 34) between white Australian and Indigenous peoples. In the white-vanishing texts, racially separated characters are clearly constructed as belonging to incommensurable worlds, and this politics of absolute difference persists from colonial to contemporary texts.

anxiety does not survive the texts' resolution: instead, the erasure (through vanishing) of characters who have in various ways 'gone native', provides the magical resolution to anxieties about the dissolution of boundaries. Those who remain behind are united in grief and loss, and tend to come together as a more delineated community (with enhanced bonds of inclusion also underscoring what is *excluded*) as they face the trauma of vanishing together.[8] The 'problem' of taint is removed by destruction of the most-tainted individual.

The semiotic parameters of the white-vanishing trope support Turner's argument that Australian fiction is characterised by anti-individualistic subject constructions and motivated by "fear of difference" (G. Turner 1984: 451). Excessive difference is punished with the vanishing of oneself or one's loved ones. Transgressive whites are produced as "docile bodies" (Foucault 1977: 135) through the white-vanishing texts' surveillance and regulation of subjects within specific social orders. These texts construct and reinforce the discursive message that members of the white occupying force in Australian space are not normally permitted to vanish; vanishing is not part of the grand social narrative of white occupancy and proliferation as manifest destiny—Anderson's "human landscape of perfect visibility" (1991: 185)—that underpins settler colonialism. White vanishing is a metaphor for seditious, unconformist, or uncivil white behaviour in general, and the threat of 'going native' in particular. A native state is not to be seen as desirable or even possible—to suggest that 'going native' is potentially a viable existence risks undoing the extensive set of Rousseauean binary oppositions that are essential to sustaining colonialism. It is this risk that the white-vanishing myth attempts to manage and avert.

The moral economy of these texts is also the moral economy of *terra nullius*: an assumption that whiteness and adherence to white social codes *create* property rights where none existed before (Buchan & Heath 2006; Frost 1981). White-vanishing texts perform and naturalise collective social mechanisms for regulating, confining and 'solving' any threatened uncivil behaviour. They are always, ultimately, texts about *white presencing* rather than white vanishing. What looks like "so many individual agents getting on with the business of expressing, exploring, negotiating, and even settling their legitimate differences—differences that define them not as white people … but as people" is in fact a "brand of special-interest politics" for white people (Chambers 1997: 197). These are texts in which whiteness is regulated and reinforced. Through this boundary management, Indigenous worlds are excluded and whites are constructed in a relationship of legitimacy with the land.

The event of white vanishing in these texts provides the illuminative counter-instance that normalises and is necessary to the discourse of white presencing. Those damaged, tainted, rebellious, or helpless whites who go missing function as the 'heretics' (White 1985) whose very individuality produces those who do not vanish as 'orthodox'. Those who approach

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[8] Even documentary-style versions of the lost-in-the-bush myth tend to refigure loss as triumph (e.g. Wainwright 2004).

hybridity precipitate a trauma that valorises the conformity of those who do not. Those who *stray* enable the rest of the white community to both demonstrate and valorise a strenuous intention to *stay*. In short, the obsessive narrativising of white vanishing in white Australian culture is part of a colonial strategy of discursively shoring up the ranks of the occupying force. In Australia, this force was primarily 'settlers' themselves rather than an overtly military invading force and discourse was (and is) fundamental to its colonising operation. The white-vanishing trope is, like the imaginary story of her son's vanishing that the bereft white mother writes and obsessively rewrites in Miller's *Child*, a kind of "spell", an "incantation" designed to "keep things the same" (1998: 137) rather than face the reality that many things need to change.

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