

Cynthia vanden Driesen, *Writing the Nation: Patrick White and the Indigene* (Rodopi, 2009)

In this work Cynthia vanden Driesen examines how Patrick White inverts colonialist presentations of indigeneity in three of his novels: *Voss*, *Fringe of Leaves*, and *Riders in the Chariot*¹. As a contrasting text, she uses Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as an example of well-known colonial work². She contends that 'Patrick White's project is unusual, in that it represents a white writer's attempt to "decolonize the mind", to stand away from the conditioning of a colonial culture and to reconstruct an image of a black world that subverts the orientalist stereotype' (xxxvi). Additionally, she distinguishes White's work from others' when he raises the possibility of white indigeneity, where the white settler 'belongs within the land as does the indigene' (xxvi). Under this perceptive mantle vanden Driesen claims White's work needs to be freshly investigated and lifts *Writing the Nation* above reflection of a national Aboriginal/white-settler tension to the more universal spectrum of transnational literature.

Supporting the uninitiated reader, and following Edward Said's call for outlining an authorial 'inventory of traces'³, vanden Driesen provides her border-crossing background as contextual placement for her perspective, supplies definitions, and produces a succinct analysis of the role, regional differences and importance of writers in settler-cultures in the broader post-colonial discourse, foregrounding Said's understandings of orientalism, and alternative representations of other cultures. With this introductory scaffolding, vanden Driesen, following Lawson,⁴ opens with an historical overview of the socio-cultural awakening from 'amnesia' concerning white Australian perceptions of its indigenous peoples (1).

Each novel is examined according to four themes presented as key indicators of colonialist outlook: indigenous autonomy, reversal of hegemony, transformation, and outcomes, with frequent reference to the historical events and existing records underpinning White's fictional re-interpretations of the facts. She notes, however, that the novels differ in time and setting, where, for example, *Voss* and *Fringe of Leaves* are set in colonial times, and have white protagonists enmeshed in a black world, while *Riders in the Chariot* has a black protagonist struggling within a white world (126). This difference affects the relationships between the characters and how they are positioned in society in each text.

In regard to autonomy, vanden Driesen shows how in *Voss*, Patrick White presents the black world as 'a solid, even an ominous presence, able and willing to mount a challenge to white intrusion' contrasting it to Conrad's presentation in *Heart of Darkness* of a black world as being 'without social cohesiveness, [with] no

¹ Patrick White, *Voss* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974); *A Fringe of Leaves* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976); *Riders in the Chariot* (New York: Viking, 1961).

² Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness: An Authoritative Text, Background and Sources, Criticism*, ed. Robert Kimbrough (New York: W.W. Norton, 2nd ed. 1971).

³ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978) 25-26.

⁴ Alan Lawson, 'Proximities: From Asymptote to Zeugma' in *Postcolonizing the Commonwealth: Studies in Literature and Culture* ed. Rowland Smith (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2000) 19-35.

potential to offer any kind of resistance to the white challenge' (33). She notes how White's progressive empowerment of Jackie in *Voss* directly contrasts with the disempowerment of the German explorer as they move away from European civilization and further into the black world, and as Voss becomes more dependent on the knowledge of the blacks in order to survive, a reversal of the traditional colonialist white 'power'/black 'powerless' binary narrative evolves.

Similarly in *Fringe of Leaves*, black society has ascendancy when the white character of Ellen loses her agency upon capture by the blacks, is subjected to the humiliation of beatings, and becomes dependent upon the charity of the blacks for her survival.

In contrast, Alf Dubbo's autonomy, in *Riders in the Chariot*, is expressed more subtly, in that his external circumstances are characterised by the sufferings inflicted from white people and the established power regimes of the white world in which he is raised and tries to flourish, but eventually will only survive, yet his inner dignity cannot be defeated, and so his personal resilience becomes his agency that allows him to transcend the barriers and humiliations to which he is subjected. Thus vanden Driesen clearly shows how Patrick White subverts the customary colonialist text through the inversion of the autonomy of the black and white characters and their innate power to resist and/or survive.

In relation to the reversal of white hegemony over blacks, vanden Driesen again uses Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* to illustrate the colonialist narrative which 'constructs the black as degenerate and inferior, deserving only of enslavement by the white' (22), before showing examples of White's post-colonial presentation. One of many examples can be seen in *Voss*, when Dugald deliberately destroys the letters he has been entrusted with. Here, White illustrates the indifference the indigenous world has for highly valued writing and written documents in a white world. This represents a vivid expression of the gulf between the two cultures, and is reinforced when Dugald removes his clothing as the group of Aborigines watch,⁵ symbolically demonstrating his refusal of white-influence over him (47).

Vanden Driesen gives equivalently powerful examples from both *Fringe of Leaves* and *Riders in the Chariot* to support her argument that in Patrick White's work there is an ongoing effort to reverse the hegemonic narrative of colonialist writing. For example the role and relationship of the convict character Jack Chance in *Fringe of Leaves* to the indigenous world explores the notion of white indigeneity when he rejects a return to the white world preferring that of the blacks.

Additionally, she attends to Patrick White's positioning of cannibalism in *Fringe of Leaves*, for example, where blacks practice it as a mystical ritual unlike whites who are shown to practice it for the purpose of staving off hunger. She explains that this latter situation is in fact the common interpretation of the practice when situated within colonialist texts about 'heathen' tribes (93). In fact, it is Ellen's participation in this act for the sake of hunger which positions the white character as the degenerate.

Finally, vanden Driesen examines the characters' transformation and outcomes. Whereas in the first two novels this transformation involves a process of indigeneity being acquired by the white characters, e.g. Voss, and Ellen in *Riders in the Chariot*, there is a reversal of this as we watch the acculturation of Alf Dubbo toward white ways. In this sense, as vanden Driesen points out, there is a movement

⁵ White, *Voss* 220.

in White's characterisation from the shifting and troubled mind of Jackie in *Voss* to that of a self-expressed acculturated Alf Dubbo in the later *Riders in the Chariot* (132). Examples provided include Alf Dubbo's acquisition of habits of hygiene from youth, moving from an oral tradition to a love of reading and using a library, and his self-expression through art leading to his first encounter with the chariot holding four figures contained in a picture in the rag collector's bible.⁶ This culminates with his painting of Christ which illustrates his understanding of the Christian mysteries of love and suffering, and is played out in the narrative with the humiliation and crucifixion of the Jewish Himmelfarb (136).

Thus Cynthia vanden Driesen illustrates through a perceptive analysis of White's three works, juxtaposed against the white-supremist writing of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, how Patrick White undermines and reverses the traditional colonialist narrative, and raises new questions concerning the possibility of white indigeneity within settler-culture environments. An appendix providing background to Jung's theories and how Patrick White's work fulfils the Jungian notion of '... art ... anticipating future changes in man's fundamental outlook',⁷ adds extra helpful information for the reader (180).

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⁶ White, *Riders* 344-5.

⁷It should be noted that vanden Driesen's use of Jung's quote has not been listed within the bibliography, but simply is footnoted as Jung, *The Spiritual Problem of Modern Man*, 237.