

Book Reviews

Elsbeth Tilley. *White Vanishing: Rethinking Australia's Lost-in-the-Bush Myth*. Cross/Cultures 152. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012. Pp. xi, 381. US\$116.

If you take this book to heart, you will begin to find colonialist discourse in every Australian cultural artefact you encounter. Elspeth Tilley's argument—and she seems to forget at times that it is an argument—is that a white colonialist agenda informs most Australian writing, not just that of the nineteenth century, but contemporary texts as well. She uses the Lost-in-the-Bush Myth, a trope that she labels *white vanishing*, as her key example supporting this assertion.

The book is well researched and thorough in its survey of the literature in and about the topic. It is densely written and full of its own special jargon: “white vanishing” (1 and “passim”), “black vanishing” (48), “white reverse-vanishing” (291), “vanished and unvanishing white characters” (99), “white presencing” (154), “heterochronic nexus points” (167), and so on. Tilley's methodology is *hyperclear* (to use one of her favourite prefixes): “there are four principal forms of textual imagery that constitute black displacements in white vanishing texts” (56). She takes the literature and looks in turn at the representation of indigenes, white people, time, and space. She defines an *indigene* as a “white-constructed Aboriginalist image” (19), and you could say that she thereby assures her conclusions about the hidden, obstinate, justificatory aspect of white Australian writing. A question one might ask in passing is why is there no *theorised* white equivalent to the *indigene*, a representational medium carrying the freight of white fantasy creation?

There appears to be another theoretical problem at the core of Tilley's argument, one she never fully confronts—that is, the actual *vanishing* of the white child or adult into the Australian bush. What can this loss or disappearance mean? Surely a number of interpretations are possible—a whole range, from white ineptitude to metaphysical desire for death/union with nature, awe in the face of the Australian “sublime,” guilt *about* or punishment *for* hubristic white occupation. One could even mount an argument for a view of this trope as anarchic rather than normative or conservative. And somewhere in that range are the “meta-discourses of white Australian colonialism” (155). Tilley is impatient with any alternative discourse, however, and at times her monocular, literal cast of mind verges on the parodic. Of the *lost white* she

says: “Or they may be lost forever, either because their body is never found, or they are found dead and are therefore unable to be restored to their white community” (100).

Tilley is stronger in her analysis of nineteenth-century texts. Their piety and apparent lack of self-awareness—she uses the terms “apparently-innocent” (1), even “disingenuous” (42)—are grist to the mill of her analysis. Her treatment of the “washing metaphor,” whereby the found child is symbolically brought back to whiteness, is perceptive and shaming (109–10); her political understanding of obfuscatory renditions of white victimhood are also excellent, as is her description of the gendering of the land (255–56). One of the best sections of the book theorises that “ignorance is also power” (324) and intriguingly discusses white narcissism, “egology” (Robert Young’s term), and white strategies of disguising “conquest as non-conquest” (324).

However, as text after text is deconstructed in the same manner and with the same conclusions, the colonialist case begins to suffer from overstatement and insistence. Legitimate and interesting insights are marginalised by a relentless repetition of the thesis. The problem with this sort of juggernaut approach is that it cannot allow any deviations to occur. The terms of critical description become absolute: “unavoidably” (299), “invariably” (23), “ultimately” (154) and “always” (154, 274, 321).

Any critic (such as Peter Pierce, Kerryn Goldsworthy, Susan Dermody) who dwells on resistance, alterity, or ambivalence is given short shrift. Even where Tilley allows that these counter interpretations are “not inaccurate,” still she maintains that they “obscure recognition” of the colonialism of texts (178). At times she appears to contort her observations to preserve her thesis: to express anxiety about “the stability of white subjectivities actually shores up the latter” (100); white helplessness is actually a sign of civility (136); Peter Weir’s film *The Last Wave* has “the false guise of an [indigenous] empowering discourse” (69); likewise, the invocation of knowledgeable and astute indigenous trackers in the literature suggests “powerlessness rather than resistance.” (Here a nervous note explains that this is the case “because I am always examining the ‘sign’ of the tracker as confined within white textuality, not actual trackers” [73].)

Like a colonialism detection device Tilley will find out the “obstinate cultural trope” (ix), no matter how it is disguised—Carmel Bird’s *The Bluebird Café* may be “parodic postmodern pastiche” but nonetheless, it too will be found to conform to the template. Tilley commences her analysis of Bird’s novel thus: “Other literary works with overt elements of liberalism can likewise be shown to covertly encode typical elements of white colonial discourse when they use variants of the white-vanishing trope as their subject-matter” (282).

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Naturally this doctrinaire stance will not suit the analysis of all writers. What of other ways of representing the country, or of portraying white/indigenous relations? What, for instance, of the sober respectfulness in the writing of Eleanor Dark? the empathy of Nene Gare? the spiritual romanticism of Patrick White, or the layered interiority of David Malouf?

The terms of Tilley's own discourse are revealing, for she consistently invokes the language of infection, disease, and wounding to describe the colonial narrative she forensically and somewhat reprovably displays; these are "discourses that are profoundly inflected with the colonial" (321). Tilley's view is that like a virulent germ, the white-vanishing trope is infecting not just primary texts but secondary critiques. For her "the ideological elements of the trope seem so strong that they override any attempts to use the white-vanishing plot for critical or subversive purposes" (268–69). She warns: "this is a trope that is beginning to spread" (326).

This book then is a fascinating work both for what it says and for what it shows. It contains a great deal of useful material and thought-provoking arguments. In its own way it is a powerful statement of anti-colonialism. Its own discourse makes it a valuable document within the arena of Australian cultural historiography. Tilley's final plea is for Australian creative writing to be more "self-consciously ideological" (331). It is an open question as to whether we really want this. In *White Vanishing*, Elspeth Tilley has made a passionate case for the affirmative.

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