

Cynthia vanden Driesen. *Writing the Nation: Patrick White and the Indigene.* Amsterdam; New York, N.Y: Rodopi, 2009, 207 pp. (Hb)

\$US 75 / Euro 50

ISBN: 9789042025165; <http://www.rodopi.nl/senj.asp?BookId=CC+97>

Writing the Nation argues that Patrick White's representation of the figure of the Aborigine subverts orientalist discourse in three ways: by restoring the autonomy of the 'black world'; by reversing the hegemonic relationship between the European and the Aborigine; and by representing the partial transformation (physical and psychic) of the 'settler-invader' into 'settler-indigene'. In these ways, it argues, White foreshadowed, and expanded the possibilities for, the re-writing of the indigene into the narrative of the nation.

As Cynthia vanden Driesen acknowledges, White's multi-faceted texts have sustained a variety of theoretical perspectives and interpretations, both national and transnational in their scope. Within the recent revival of White scholarship, critical responses have sought to reconcile, or at least accommodate, these alternative approaches. Consistent with this trend, vanden Driesen identifies within White's texts a synthesis of national and universal themes, whereby 'the spiritual parable [of *Riders in the Chariot*] intertwines with the parable of nation' (144), while 'the search for individuation and the search for nation ... are one' (174).

Despite these developments, in a recent review of two new additions to the field, *Remembering Patrick White: Contemporary Critical Essays* (eds. Elizabeth McMahon and Brigitta Olubas) and *Patrick White within the Western Literary Tradition* (John Beston), Charles Lock has decried the so-called 'critical provincialism' of Australian White scholarship; its circumscription within 'Australian standards and terms of comparison', and its down-playing of the 'wider universal application[s] and resonance[s]' of White's texts. Contrary to this claim (and by Lock's admission), however, both texts juxtapose nationalist with transnationalist perspectives, while the first incorporates emergent theoretical perspectives, including those of queer theory and modernist studies. Vanden Driesen's book continues this trend, in its bid to reframe Australian literature (and White) within the larger, transnational fields of settler-culture and postcolonial literatures.

The book is divided into four chapters. The first, titled 'Recovery from Amnesia', charts a 'dramatic reversal' in the consciousness of and attitudes to Australia's Aborigines, evinced in recent and past events, and documented in a surge of academic and literary output since the mid-1980s. Chapters Two, Three and Four present a text-by-text analysis of the representation of the indigene in *Voss* (1957), *A Fringe of Leaves* (1976) and *Riders in the Chariot* (1961) respectively. Following Edward Said's call for the critic to declare his/her 'speaking position', the Introduction opens with a brief autobiography. This sets out vanden Driesen's life-experience of 'the breadth and depth of the colonial experience', having been 'born and brought up in an ex-colonized land (Sri Lanka)', and lived and taught in Sri Lanka, Nigeria, Korea and Australia (xiii). Here, she recounts her 'induction into Australian culture' through *The Tree of Man*. The 'overwhelming' effect

of its 'nature and dimensions', and her belief in the writer's 'capacity to answer the deep-seated psychic needs of his people', both colour her analysis (xi).

In the analysis that follows, vanden Driesen draws on the theories of Edward Said, in particular his book *Orientalism* (1978). Here, attitudes to the Australian indigene are assumed to be 'intimately bound up with' British attitudes to the African (xv), and traceable to the slave trade and human trafficking of African races. On this assumption, the book invokes Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as a 'paradigmatic orientalist text': an exemplar of the 'classic signage of orientalist ideology' outlined by Said (xviii). This serves as the basis of a comparative analysis, and a counterpoint to White's 'counter-discourse' (xxvi). If, as influential African author Chinua Achebe has suggested, *Heart of Darkness* is 'racist', White's texts, vanden Driesen contends, negate its dehumanisation of the non-European and valorisation of European culture. The Introduction concludes with a brief survey of literary responses to the Indigenous presence in Australia, from Charles Harpur in the 1840s through to Katharine Susannah Prichard in the 1930s.

Chapter One provides a background to the central issues, retracing recent developments in the transformation of white Australia's relationship with the Aborigine. These include: the Mabo (1992) and Wik (1996) native-title land-claims, the Royal Commission into Black Deaths in Custody (1991), and the national apology to 'the stolen generation' (2008). Citing Henry Reynolds' lecture, 'The Breaking of the Great Australian Silence: Aborigines in Australian Historiography, 1955-1983' (1984) and Paul Hasluck's book, *Black Australians: A Survey of Native Policy in Western Australia, 1829-1897* (1942), vanden Driesen assesses the absence of Aboriginal perspectives in earlier historical narratives of Australia, and recent efforts to write the Aborigine back in, for example, through new modes of investigation and historicisation. Vanden Driesen locates her book within these efforts, as part of an upsurge in academic attention to Aboriginal Australia across a range of disciplines, including literary studies. Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra's book, *Dark Side of the Dream: Australian Literature and the Postcolonial Mind* (1991), receives particular attention, for its sophisticated theorisation of the relationship of the cultural models of white and Aboriginal Australia, and as 'the most significant attempt to date' to re-situate this relationship within a comparative, postcolonial model (and outside the nationalist model) (6-7).

Chapter One concludes with a brief comparison of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and White's *Voss*, *A Fringe of Leaves* and *Riders in the Chariot*, in terms of their respective treatment of three themes: the autonomy of the 'black world', the white/black relationship, and the transformation of the settler-invader. These themes provide the structure of the subsequent chapters, in which each text is assessed under the following sub-headings (or minor variations thereof): 'Autonomy of the black world', 'Reversal of the white/black hegemonic relationship', 'Transformation of settler-invader into settler-indigene' and 'The outcome'. Under the second-last heading, vanden Driesen examines instances of 'crossing over' from white settler into indigenous space in *Voss* and *A Fringe of Leaves*. These, she argues, articulate the possibility of (at least the partial) transformation of white 'invader' into white 'indigene', and challenge 'the irreversible alterity of the Other' (25). In this argument, the manifestation of 'characteristics associated with the indigene' (e.g. 'a kind of bonding to the land') in the convict figure,

in turn, implies the 'candidacy of the convict for the position of white indigene in the colonialist world' (25). Again, in *Riders in the Chariot* the body of the 'half-caste', Alf Dubbo, encapsulates 'the merging of black into white' (25).

Chapter Two turns its attention to *Voss*, to its portrayal of the explorer figure, and to its source materials, the journals of Leichhardt and Eyre. The chapter highlights both *Voss*' 'affiliations' with its source materials and points of departure between the three texts. Contemporary historical accounts of the two journals, and of the events depicted (or excluded) therein, provide further points of comparison. While the 'History Wars' receive brief mention (in Chapter One), their offshoot, the so-called 'History and Fiction Wars' do not, or not directly. Vanden Driesen echoes, however, the controversial claim by Kate Grenville, of the novelist's capacity to 'step...outside' history and 'actually get inside the experience', by virtue of 'imaginative understanding'. In like vein, vanden Driesen claims, '*Voss* shows the creative imagination of the writer piercing the obfuscations of white history to extract the deeper truth of events' (35).

This theme of the relation between history and fiction is sustained in Chapter Three, in its analysis of *A Fringe of Leaves*, and of its relation to the Eliza Fraser story. As with *Voss*, it tells us, 'it was no part of White's intention to remain faithful to historical evidence' (79). Or, as White put it, 'I feel historical reconstructions are too limiting ... so I did not stick to the facts' (79). Again, as in the previous chapter, the 'original historical material' is contrasted with White's 're-invention' of it (80). This chapter re-traces the transformation of the Eliza Fraser story, through historical and fictional accounts, as well as art and film. In particular, it incorporates early and recent Aboriginal perspectives. In addition to indigeneity, aspects of class and gender are considered.

The focus of Chapter Four is *Riders in the Chariot*. In a variation on the method of Chapters Two and Three, Chapter Four compares the text with two novels, Mudrooroo's *Wild Cat Falling* (1965) and *Wild Cat Screaming* (1992), and points to White's 'considerable insight into the plight of the modern-day Aborigine' (123). This is supported by reference to historical and literary accounts of the construction of Aboriginality. In the conclusion, the text reviews pre-existing scholarship on White's representation of the indigene, including more critical responses, such as that of Simon During (1996). This is supplemented by a section on 'White's personal interest in the Aborigine', as expressed in his self-portrait *Flaws in the Glass*, his letters and speeches. An appendix presents a previously published article, titled 'Jung, the Artist and Society, and Patrick White'.

Any book on Patrick White is a welcome addition. *Writing the Nation* provides the first, book-length study of the Aboriginal presence within White's work, and the third book on White in the Cross/Cultures series. As we approach the centenary of his birth and the publication of *The Hanging Garden* in 2012, there is renewed interest in White, both within Australia and internationally. Along with several recent publications, this book reflects the continued relevance of his works, and signals future possibilities for the expansion of White scholarship, within and across national and transnational contexts.

Georgina Loveridge, University of Sydney