

**Neo-Victorianism, settler (post)colonialism and domesticity  
in Patrick White's *Voss***

**Abstract**

This article reads Patrick White's 1957 novel *Voss* as an early example of Neo-Victorian fiction, a relatively recent but critically well-established category of post-war and contemporary fiction that has not yet been deployed with reference to *Voss*. I argue that, whilst seemingly adopting the elements of Australian narratives of exploration and settlement, White's Neo-Victorian approach in fact contests these narratives, which began to emerge in the nineteenth-century that forms the setting of the novel and were still current in the mid-twentieth-century when it was written. In so doing, *Voss* exposes the tensions and contradictions inherent in settler narratives more generally and shows their reliance on social, cultural and textual models imported from Britain, primary amongst them rural domesticity and the pastoral. My reading of *Voss* challenges existing scholarship on White's novel, which tends to see *Voss* either as a contribution to the discourse of Australian national identity or as a work interested in a-historical, mythological self-realization for the two protagonists, Ulrich Voss and Laura Trevelyan.

**Keywords:** Patrick White, *Voss*, Neo-Victorianism, settler colonialism, national narratives, domesticity, pastoral, Australian literature.

According to Andrew Hassam (1997), colonialism and colonization are distinguished by adherence to the Victorian 'differentiat[ion]' between 'the practices of travel and the practices of dwelling' (64). Travel, Hassam suggests, presupposes the performance of heroic masculinity in exploring or conquering the frontiers of Empire and its model is to be found in adventure narratives; dwelling relies on domestic femininity to make and preserve a home and is articulated in Victorian realism. Yet the experience of colonization by migration and settlement 'will not easily fit either model' (Hassam,

1997: 66): both men and women must travel and both men and women must contribute to setting up home in the place of arrival. Even if it is preceded by adventurous undertakings – not least a long sea passage, confrontation with the natives, the taming of recalcitrant nature – nevertheless the ultimate goal of colonization is a domestic one. Hassam's argument offers a productive entry point to a reading of Patrick White's *Voss* (1957)<sup>i</sup>. The novel initially articulates the conventional Victorian distinction between adventure and domesticity only to subsequently show that it cannot be adequately maintained in a settler colonial context. Thus, *Voss*'s ostensible structural arrangement gestures towards the separation of travel and dwelling but the actual unfolding of the plot undermines it. Similarly, the heroic aspirations of the explorers led by Voss are at first contrasted with the prosaic preoccupations of the Sydney dwellers, but their adventurous undertaking is finally subsumed into the domesticating operations of commemorative ritual led by the official authorities in the city.

The critical consensus on *Voss* takes at face value the separation of domesticity/dwelling and adventure/travel, centred on the coast and the interior respectively, which I will argue is in fact highly unstable, and uses it as confirmation of a particular view of Australian identity founded on 'an adventurous, masculinist citizenship' (Bandopadhyay, 2009: 127). Scholarship on the novel routinely privileges the outback as the site of, variously, self-discovery, experience of the divine, confrontation with the wilderness, or the forging of individual and national character, all

set against the mundanity, constraining domesticity and materialism of the city. In these readings, Sydney and its inhabitants are taken to be pale imitations of Englishness, whose homes, work and leisure are defined by the models of the imperial metropolis, whilst the true Australia is to be found in the undomesticated interior. For Keith Garebian (1976) the novel's two poles are the 'primeval' desert 'remote from human society' and the civilised 'city-garden' (558). Peter Knox-Shaw (1987) equates Voss's 'commitment to the desert' to an 'uncovenanted self' (167), that is to say, a self that refuses to accept and share the strictures of domesticity as represented by the Bonners' circle in Sydney. A contrast between 'those in the desert' and 'the huddlers' in the city had been drawn as early as Barry Argyle's study of White's writing (Argyle, 1967: 42, 43). More recently, Mark Williams (1993) has suggested that *Voss* is really 'two radically different kinds of novels placed uneasily side by side', one a bourgeois 'comedy of manner', the other an allegory centred on the 'expedition into the heart of the country' (60).

There has been renewed interest in Patrick White in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with three edited collections that aim to expand scholarship on his work in two main directions: firstly, to include more recent critical developments such as queer theory and secondly, to engage with lesser-known texts such as his plays. Despite generally offering greater critical breadth and more rigorously theoretical readings of White than earlier critics, the discussions of *Voss* in these volumes largely adhere to long-established lines of enquiry, emphasising the transcendental aspects of the novel at the expense of its historical

situatedness. The chapter on the novel in Elizabeth McMahon and Brigitta Olubas's *Remembering Patrick White* (2010) reads *Voss* as 'a mystical *and* human meditation on possible forms of identity' (McCredde, 2010: 111), thus detaching the novel from its historical context and referent, even though McCredde's argument opens with the acknowledgement that *Voss* resembles 'the type of the nineteenth-century imperialist with an overweening sense of destiny and a desire to conquer the vastness of the unknown land' (110). Revealingly, Veronica Brady's essay 'The Dragon Slayer: Patrick White and the Contestation of History' makes no mention of *Voss*, confirming that the novel's status as a transcendental meditation on will, identity, sacredness and the like endures. Cynthia vanden Driesen and Bill Ashcroft's *Patrick White Centenary: The Legacy of a Prodigal Son* (2014) is a capacious collection that aims for comprehensiveness in its discussion of White's writings. It features essays on *Voss* by Bill Ashcroft and Antonella Riem, both partly inflected by postcolonial criticism. Ashcroft in particular notes that notions of home are explored in the novel, but does not consider them in light of a historically defined settler colonial domesticity. Similarly, although Riem points to the novel's critique of settler colonialism in Australia, she endows the critique with spiritual aspects (particularly in her reference to a 'human territory in all its complexities and sacredness' [225]) that detract from what I argue is the historicising impulse of the novel. Finally, Ian Henderson and Anouk Lang explicitly place *Patrick White Beyond the Grave* (2015) in a dialogical relationship with existing criticism on White and aim to turn critical attention

away from discussions of White as an Australian author in order to ‘point new ways forward ...on global modernism and on queer literature’ (Henderson, 2015: 10).

Against these readings and following Hassam’s insight, I aim to show that in the context of a settler colony the neat demarcation of domesticity and adventure is unsustainable and that, in spite of the ostensibly adventurous plot, domesticity in *Voss* is all-encompassing, providing not only the ideological underpinning but also the practical means for exploration of the Australian interior. The expedition itself is punctuated by its engagement with different models of domesticity, so that at the various stages of the explorer’s journey the novel recapitulates the nineteenth-century forms of Australian settlement and exposes the exploitative reality belied by their outward self-sufficient industriousness. In the process, *Voss* calls into question the very mythology of Australia and, with it, the settler narratives of national identity that had started to be shaped in the period of the novel’s setting and were still largely unchallenged by the time of its publication. Those same discourses are shown at play in the latter part of the novel, when Voss’s journey is appropriated for national history and the horror of the explorers’ fate is negated by the domesticating rituals of official ceremonies and public statuary. My discussion of *Voss* is based on two related premises: firstly, that the novel can be read through the literary-critical category of Neo-Victorianism, which will highlight the consistent ironic undercutting of the very nineteenth-century discourses the novel

deploys; secondly, that the irony serves to expose the contradictions inherent in national narratives of settler colonialism more generally.

### ***Voss* as a Neo-Victorian text**

In *A History of Australian Literature* (1986), Kenneth Goodwin introduces *Voss* as a novel that ‘deal[s] with some of the central Australian myths, including the attempt to conquer the unknown interior ...and the contrast of Sydney and the bush’ (171). The suggestion that White’s novel ‘has a certain patriotic thrust’ (Brady, 1979: 169) in that it participates in the mythologizing of a particular Australian identity was mooted in its early reviews. For example, Hartley Grattan (1957) in *The New York Times Book Review* described it as ‘a brilliant exploration of a fundamental article of Australian faith, the notion that Australians’ true and original values are rooted in the outback, not the cities’ (4). *Voss* was the first recipient of the Miles Franklin Literary Award, an annual recognition for work ‘which is of the highest literary merit and presents Australian life in any of its phases’ (Johnston and Lawson, 2010: 36).

*Voss*’s genre contributes to the impression that the novel simply re-articulates the myths of Australian national identity. As Kerryn Goldsworthy (2000) notes, in the twentieth century the historical novel in Australia had become the vehicle for ‘nation-building’ (108): the genre ‘seem[s] driven by a mythopoeic impulse ...to tell stories about the country that construct it as a nation, and to move it away from the inchoate colonialism

of its origins by returning to them and exploring the process of nation formation' (108). Robert Dixon (2014) notes that the construction of an Australian identity depends on 'an alignment of nation and continent, literature, land, and nation' which 'imagines the history of inland discovery as a progressive realization of the "connected" and unified nature of both the continent as a geographic entity and the nation as a social polity' (145, 144). He also points out, however, that 'the sense of national identity' articulated in these terms and located in the stories about exploration and settlement of the bush is in fact 'a retrospective creation of later decades, and especially the 1950s' (Dixon, 2014: 145). Bandopadhyay (2009) concurs, pointing out that conceptual understandings of Australia based on the territorial expansion towards an internal frontier (modelled on histories of the United States) date from 'the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century' (126). *Voss*, published in 1957, is therefore at once a reflection of particular critical, historiographical and national concerns current at the time of its writing, a revisiting of the historical and discursive origins of those concerns in the early Victorian period, and a questioning of their validity in the past as in the present. In this engagement with a double referent, and in its fundamentally ironic position with respect to it, White's novel enacts a classic Neo-Victorian operation.

"Neo-Victorianism" is the result of recent critical attempts to theorise the relationship of historical novels set in the nineteenth century with both their historical referent and their present (twentieth- or twenty-first century) context. As defined by Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn (2010), Neo-Victorianism refers to textual productions

that are '*self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*' (4, original italics). The emphasis in this definition is on the awareness that the recovery of a Victorian antecedent from a contemporary perspective is textual in nature, for the antecedent (often a canonical Victorian narrative) as much as for the Neo-Victorian product (a fiction about the nineteenth century). In other words, Neo-Victorianism engages discursively with the nineteenth century, dissecting the ideologies of the earlier period as they manifested themselves in texts and subjecting them to critique from a present-day perspective that nevertheless relies on those prior texts for its very articulation. The result is a 'double-coding' that 'splices together' (Carroll, 2010: 183) Victorian discourses and contemporary sensibility to create a palimpsestic construct, which 'pay[s] a kind of homage' (Heilmann and Llewellyn, 2010: 8) to the nineteenth century even whilst it questions its ideological premises. In the process the palimpsest reveals that the Victorian moment that is the subject of the contemporary narratives is in some way still current and relevant at the time of those narratives' writing.

In *Neo-Victorianism and the Memory of Empire* (2012), Elizabeth Ho argues that Neo-Victorianism's ambivalence towards its historical referent, simultaneously critiquing 'entrenched master narratives' whilst also manifesting nostalgic 'feelings of regression and return' (11) is particularly evident – and productive – in former settler colonies like Australia, where the nineteenth century is remembered as both the height of Britain's global imperial power and the moment when a separate national identity began



to emerge. Ho firmly places Neo-Victorianism in a postcolonial theoretical frame, arguing for its global reach and significance as a ‘memorial practice’: a ‘site within which the memory of empire and its surrounding discourses and strategies of representation can be replayed and played out’ (8 and 5). I argue that *Voss* epitomises not only the ambivalence, but also the memorial impulse Ho describes, evident in the novel’s engagement with the national commemorative practices that frame the explorers’ enterprise.

The textual antecedents for *Voss*’s Neo-Victorian re-writing are the narratives of settlement that underpin Australia’s national myths of its origins and validate the settlers’ actions in the process of establishing their presence in the continent. Such narratives, Lorenzo Veracini (2010) argues, are ‘linear’ and ‘teleological’ in structure (99). Linearity and teleology in White’s novel ought to reside with the explorers’ journey, but in an ironic reversal that signals *Voss*’s Neo-Victorian stance, their progress takes them from the fully established urban settlement of Sydney through the pioneering rural domesticity of Rhine Towers to the unsettled anti-domesticity of Jildra, and finally to a battle with the elements that is normally the starting point of the settler narrative. And all the while the expedition’s movement becomes erratic. This suggests that linearity and teleology are retrospectively imposed on the haphazard colonization of the continent by the narratives that describe that enterprise, to signify a purposefulness it did not have.

White's decision to model Johann Ulrich Voss on German explorer Ludwig Leichhardt, as extensively traced by Angus Nicholls (2015), is interesting in this respect, because it suggests that from the start *Voss* offers at least implicit critique of the celebratory narratives of exploration and settlement. After Leichhardt's first, feted 'overland trek through largely unmapped territory which covered some 4,800 kilometres' (Nicholls, 2015: 41) in 1845-46, the next two attempts to cross Australia were unsuccessful. One resulted in an ignominious return from the interior with a divided expedition defeated by the elements and during the other the explorers disappeared altogether, echoing Voss's fate. As a consequence of both the objective failure to fulfil his later expeditions' purpose and the criticism of his leadership by members of the second expedition, Leichhardt's own place in the national narratives of Australia was still contested in the mid-twentieth century. Given that *Voss* shows White's preoccupation not only with historical events but also with the official memorialisation of those events, Leichhardt's 'ambivalent status in Australia's cultural history' (Nicholls, 2015: 44) becomes important to understanding the novel's sceptical take on the practices and purpose of memorialization.

Each location on the explorers' path in *Voss* is further presented through a Neo-Victorian lens, which superimposes how the characters see themselves with how the novel perceives them in retrospect. The Sydney settlers' push towards the interior (at second-hand, by means of money) is motivated by the practical aim to expand the reach

of their businesses and, with it, the institutions of the nation: they offer funds and national celebration equally. With Voss's arrival at Rhine Towers and Jildra, the novel gives voice to the pastoral capitalism that defined the relationship between the antipodean settler colonies and the imperial metropolis, but also shows the discursive sleight of hand that refracts colonial modernity through the prism of an Arcadian myth. Finally, in the explorers' fate and its aftermath *Voss* revisits an enduring foundational myth of the Australian nation – that 'in order to be an "Australian", one has to come to terms with a sense of bonding with the land' (Bandopadhyay, 2009: 127) – by showing how it came into being not primarily by the actions of those who drove into the bush, but rather by the appropriation of their experiences for national purposes by the official institutions based in the cities. Whilst seemingly contributing to the national myth-making described above, with the novel's plot centred on precisely the kind of exploratory enterprise that seeks to map the interior in order to apprehend the territory imaginatively as well as physically, *Voss* in fact queries the form and the substance of the myth. White's deployment of domesticity is central to this interrogation.

### **Sydney, urban domesticity and mercantile capitalism**

The Anglicised urban domesticity of the established settlers on the coast is exemplified by the house of Mr Bonner. It is owned by a trader who emigrated from Britain with relatively modest means and has made the most of the opportunities for

enrichment offered by Australia, yet who, with his family, retains British categories of identity centred on the separation of domesticity/dwelling and travel/adventure. On his first visit there, with frayed trouser hems unbefitting the genteel surroundings, Voss is 'distressed by the furniture' in the 'rich, relentless' (*Voss*, 10, 11) room where markers of enclosed bourgeois domesticity abound. The rituals of an Anglicised domesticity shaped by concerns with the gradations of social class are visible in Laura Trevelyan's decision to offer Voss (who is only dubiously entitled to being called 'a gentleman,' *Voss*: 7) the second-best port.

Mrs Bonner conceives of her life in Australia with reference to the country she left behind on her marriage, while her life, like those of her daughter and niece, is punctuated by social rituals that have simply been transported with them even to the other side of the world – parties and balls, with 'picnics', 'rid[ing] out on horseback' or 'a few days with friends, on a property' (*Voss*: 11) marking the limited and imitative extent to which their Anglicised domesticity impinges on the colonial territory. Laura Trevelyan's allegiance to Australia is only tenuously articulated (it is 'the country which, for lack of any other, she supposed was hers', *Voss*: 11) and her aunt sighs at the mention of her present country because 'she remembered others' (*Voss*: 28). Just like for their friend Mrs Pringle, the phrase 'at Home' (*Voss*: 221) refers to England, so that the Bonners' settler identity is marked by contradictory impulses: on the one hand, the acknowledgement that Australia is not Britain; on the other, the desire to live in it as if it were.

In Sydney the Australian interior is envisaged as ‘a resource for a modern capitalist episteme and its teleology of perpetual growth and development’ (Moslund, 2015: 155). This explains why it is these very same settlers who fund Voss’s expedition into the bush, aware of the economic possibilities of the largely unpopulated country: to Mr Bonner, Australia is ‘the country of the future’ where there is ‘an opportunity’ to ‘get rich’ (*Voss*: 28). Its identity is for him defined by the ‘homes and public edifices’ that mark the ‘progress’ (*Voss*: 29) made by administrators and settlers in shaping the territory to an English ideal of civic pride and agricultural industriousness, oblivious to the fact that such combination is already oxymoronic in Britain, where by 1845 large-scale industrialisation has supplanted the rural economy and ‘all the talk’ is of ‘machines’ (*Voss*: 221). Bonner’s investment in the exploratory mission is wholly practical (consisting of money, everyday equipment and the logistics of arranging suitable quantities of sheep, cattle and goats for the trip). Nevertheless, the blank map spread out in his study and the official visit of a representative of the Governor of Australia when Voss’s ship is about to sail gesture towards an as yet inchoate striving to endow the enterprise with national historical significance, in the same way that ‘[t]he crossing of the Blue Mountains in 1813 by Blaxland, Wentworth, and Lawson, men whose main concern was to find pasturage for sheep and cattle, was later mythologised as a feat that allowed the transformation of the colony from a small outpost of Empire to a prosperous and progressive province’ (Waterhouse, 2008: 55). Mrs Bonner refers to Voss’s journey to the interior as ‘an event

of national significance' and '[a]n historical occasion' in quick succession, with the narrator continuing and at the same time ridiculing the nationalist discourse by the ironic metaphor of the 'flag she intended to plant upon the summit of her argument' (*Voss*: 78). Seeing off the expedition at Sydney harbour is a cross-section of Australian society, from the officialdom of 'at least three members of the Legislative Council, a Bishop, a Judge, officers in the army' to the reflected importance of the 'patrons of the expedition', to the settlers 'whose wealth had begun to make them acceptable' (*Voss*: 113). Whatever Voss's conception of his journey as an individual endeavour, it is from the start co-opted for the pre-emptive consumption of the settlers: as the narrator points out, Voss 'was already more of a statue than a man ...for he would satisfy their longing to perch something on a column, in a square or gardens, as a memorial to their own achievement' (*Voss*: 109). Whilst the official representatives of the Empire are presented ironically by the omniscient narrator – not least by stressing their incongruous Englishness – they are also necessary to enshrine the discursive significance of the expedition beyond its practical aims.

There is more than the ironic distancing of omniscient narration at work in this vignette; rather, the emphasis on the public dimension of Voss's expedition is a Neo-Victorian comment on the mythologizing of the conquest of the bush that was effected by a combination of retrospective narrativization and monumental commemoration. White reveals a tension between Voss's solipsistic pronouncements about the

forthcoming exploration and the communal reality of it. Not only is Voss accompanied by a number of fellow would-be explorers, he depends for his success on supplies provided by those who have already established homes in the bush. In *Voss* the explorers' journey becomes at one and the same time an instance of '[t]he fundamental myths of Australian nationhood' consisting of 'stories ...about an original vast vacancy and its almost instantaneous possession by a single, united people' (Atkinson, 2008: 40) and an acknowledgement that the empty land imagined in those narratives never existed. The mythologizing impulse, which substitutes the reality of a continent already populated with the discursive fantasy of the blank map to be heroically filled by means of exploration, is all the stronger because the Anglicised domesticity of the Bonners and their acquaintances is precarious: 'scrub ...still stood along the road before the town' and even in Mr Bonner's well-tended garden '[t]he science of horticulture had failed to exorcise the spirit of the place' so that '[t]he wands and fronds of native things intruded still' (*Voss*: 26, 156). The recurring 'still' indicates the enduring resistance of the country to the domesticating acts signified by man-made settlements or formal gardens.

### **Pastoral and anti-pastoral domesticity: Rhine Towers and Jildra**

That the expedition is funded by the very Sydney commercial interests who perceive themselves as Englishmen in Australia and who conceive of it as the means of attaching their names to something other than commerce suggests that the incipient

national ideal is underpinned by more conventional, practical capitalist considerations. Indeed, the former might be envisaged to mask or ennoble the latter. A comparable obscuring of a capitalist and frequently exploitative reality by a discursively articulated model derived from England is apparent in the first two stages of Voss's journey to the interior, Mr Sanderson's estate at Rhine Towers and Mr Boyle's settlement at Jildra. The former illustrates the Arcadian pastoral discourse which, as Coral Lansbury (1970) has shown, became 'the most favoured interpretation' of Australia in English literature from the mid-nineteenth century and 'dominated the thought and traditions of writing in Australia' itself (2). Rhine Towers embodies dreams of a pastoral pioneering paradise, which can be read as a benign domesticating process that elides capitalist exploitation of the land, let alone the dispossession of its aboriginal dwellers. Jildra, on the other hand, presents an anti-pastoral environment where no discursive efforts have been made to couch an exploitative colonial settlement in acceptable form.

There has been little critical attention to White's Neo-Victorian critique of the pastoral rhetoric of settlement or to his exposure of the economic underpinning of the Australian pastoralism in his treatment of Rhine Towers and Jildra. Even when the significance of these two models of settlement is recognised by critics, their interpretation tends to emphasise the allegorical dimension of the contrast over its historically situated capitalist and exploitative foundations. Carolyn Bliss (1986) typically uses a Christian interpretive framework and introduces Sanderson's and Boyle's estates as 'the novel's



patently paradisaical and infernal demesnes' (66) respectively. John Scheckter (1998) briefly mentions that '[t]he settled areas through which the party passes on the way to the interior represent textually a further catalogue of settlers' attitudes toward the land' but is ultimately more interested in how they offer 'more expansively a critique of long-standing versions of personal actualization and redemption' (66). Neither sees the novel in relation to a historically and geographically located Australian Victorian discourse, which as I argue is essential to *Voss's* Neo-Victorian revisiting of the past.

Richard Waterhouse (2008) points out that 19<sup>th</sup>-century Australian land legislators were motivated by a vision of the nation 'as a land of small-scale farmers' (55) modelled on an English past made of 'village and rural communities' that in the home country had by then already been superseded by the changes wrought during the Industrial Revolution. There is in fact an inherent contradiction between the 'visions of simple swains, pioneering families and well-fed peasantry' and 'the Australian reality', as Richard White (1981) explains: 'Australia's economy, and British interest in the colonies, was to be based on big sheep-runs, mining and large cities. Nor was Australia to be an extension of rural England: Australia's connection was with industrial England, providing wool for its factories and markets for its goods. These hard realities were ignored. Rather the romantic visions were an imaginative response to industrialisation in England' (34). In other words, settlement in the outback is envisaged as providing a replacement home of the kind lost to England; the otherness of the land – its unfamiliar flora and fauna, its difficult climate

and often miserable conditions – is discursively elided by imposing on it a pastoral frame of reference imported from the “home” of the would-be settlers. Thus, not only is populating the bush understood as a domestic enterprise which consists of setting up home in the wilderness and taming it; the discourse motivating such visions of domesticity is derived from England. The contrast between Sydney and the bush turns out to be considerably less stark than it appeared at first. The very epitome of Australian identity is in effect an English imaginative import validated by a literary genre (the Arcadian pastoral) that understands the new lands in relation to ‘a vision of agrarian plenty’ (Scheckter, 1998: 38).

The estate at Rhine Towers and its surrounding lands are consistent with the pastoral vision of settlement on ‘fat lands’ (Voss: 124). It is set in ‘a gentle, healing landscape’ and is surrounded by ‘small holdings’ that recall an English village and give ‘a sense of homecoming’ (Voss: 124, 127). The domesticity mobilised here is also coloured with nostalgia, whose proper meaning is indeed homecoming and which is the defining trait of Arcadian literature. The pastoral image is completed by the sight of cattle ‘being brought to the fold by a youthful shepherd’ (Voss: 127-8). The picture is one of idyllic relationship between work on the land and its reward that is properly Arcadian in that it is detached from history and from economic considerations (since there is no mention of making money from the land) and in that it appears to be orderly and ordered in a providential manner around the domestic ideal of the homestead. The party of

explorers is met by 'rosy children' in 'homespun frocks' with 'an aura of timelessness' (*Voss*: 125). Their mothers 'run out ...dashing the suds from their arms, or returning to its brown bodice the big breast that had been giving suck', an image of domestic labour and fertility. Their fathers talk 'with some intelligence of weather, flocks, or crops' (*Voss*: 125), as if they were repositories of timeless rural knowledge, transmitted through the generations, whereas in reality they can only have recently settled in an unfamiliar environment. Domesticity is ensured even in the humblest environment, such as the emancipist Judd and his wife's plot, by the conspicuous presence of a white woman – whether standing in front of the 'house, or hut' (*Voss*: 145) or engaged in making butter. Such is the seeming communion between settlers and land that the hut 'melted into the live trunks of the surrounding trees' and its building materials 'formed part of a natural disguise' (*Voss*: 145).

Sanderson's home, a fully built 'edifice, in colour a faded yellow ochre, with whitewashed posts and window-frames' (*Voss*: 130), reproduces the architecture, social dynamics and values of the landed gentry in England – the very class, that is, which in the home country was losing out to the economic power of the industrial cities. In the house 'little children ran clattering and calling over the stone floors, maids came with loaves of yellow bread and stiffly laundered napkins, and dogs were whining and pointing at the smells of baking meats' (*Voss*: 130-1). This picture of idealised domesticity would not be complete without the 'fire of ironbark' burning in the dining room, a literal hearth

projecting the 'clear, golden light' (*Voss*: 131) of its metaphorical counterpart. In contrast to the talk of progress and money at the Bonners' table, Sanderson outlines 'the strong habits of everyday life' that tie him to the land since they arrived on the 'bullock wagons' of pioneering myths (*Voss*: 135). What is 'conveyed most vividly to the minds of his audience' are 'simple images' (*Voss*: 135) rather than quantifiable advantages, even though the settlement is obviously economically successful and has parts of it (sheds for shearing, for example) that have a clear practical purpose.

Of all the instances of making a home in Australia that White's novel examines, the Sanderson estate comes closest to embodying the ideal of providentially sanctioned rural settlement. And yet the idealised pastoral of Rhine Towers is pre-emptively qualified by the extradiegetic intervention of the narrator, who, putting omniscience of a distinctly Victorian cast to the Neo-Victorian use of exposing the gap between discourse and reality, informs us that Sanderson's good fortune is neither the premise nor the reward for his personal morality, but rather a function of the fact that 'he was rich and among the first to arrive' (*Voss*: 126).

The suggestion that there is a causal relationship between morality, work and reward and that domestic orderliness is what underlies that relationship is further contested when the explorers stop at the next large property, Mr Boyle's at Jildra. There is no neat homestead here as the reference to the 'house' is immediately corrected to a 'shack of undaubed slab' (*Voss*: 166). No family occupies this dwelling: instead, Boyle

is surrounded by native women whose relationship to him is unclear. Neither does orderliness prevail: 'the floor was littered with crumbs and crusts' (*Voss*: 166) and the homely dogs of Rhine Towers have been replaced by '[b]irds and mice' (*Voss*: 166). The country around the homestead is not divided up into smallholdings but occupied by aboriginals who move to and from Boyle's land, providing further evidence that Jildra does not conform to (and makes no pretence of conforming to) a domestic environment inflected by the pastoral categories imported from England. There is little sense that Boyle is intent on cultivation or husbandry in person, since he is almost exclusively shown eating and drinking or riding out rather aimlessly. Even the landscape surrounding the house is 'confused' (*Voss*: 166). The factor that most clearly undermines the association of Australian rural domesticity with morality and due economic reward is the realisation that Boyle, for all his 'crude' sensual requirements, has 'done as nicely as most people, and will do better' (*Voss*: 166, 167) amidst the disorder and general slovenliness of the place. Thus, the exploitative nature of his settlement is validated by results just as clearly as the seemingly non-exploitative Sanderson estate – whose economic principles are simply obscured by its congruence with the discourse of the pastoral and by the benign ideological associations of ordered domesticity. Indeed, in a neat metaphorical reversal the books voraciously read by the Sandersons are torn up and used by Boyle to prop up uneven pieces of furniture. Not only is this an indication of Boyle's disregard for the genteel, cultured society modelled on the English gentry; it also suggests that, unlike

Rhine Towers, the settlement at Jildra refuses the discursive models of the pastoral: instead, as I have argued, it shows the unvarnished reality of rural capitalism.

### **Domesticity and Johann Ulrich Voss**

Scheckter argues that '[t]he "home" pole [in *Voss*] is the materialistic Victorian society of Sydney in the 1840s' and that White 'hardly develop[s] the "home" environment' (64, 65). Not only is this a questionable claim, given that the Sydney sections are comparable in length to those focusing exclusively on the explorers. It also neglects the evidence of the practical and ideological pull of domesticity on Voss and the expedition.

Such is the dominance of domesticity in the cultural framework the novel exposes, that its parameters imbue Voss's understanding of the territory he is traversing: the 'immense country' is conceived of as a '*House*' (*Voss*: 216), in which he can imagine a spiritual and physical union with Laura Trevelyan. He muses on 'how they had never spoken together using the truly humble words that convey the innermost reality: bread, for instance, or water', recognizing 'the common need for sustenance' (*Voss*: 190). This becomes yet another version of the domestic ideal of the nuclear family and confirms that "home" is the category around which an Australian identity is conceived. Indeed, the further into the inhospitable desert (the supposedly true Australia) the expedition travels, the more the actions of the explorers revolve around domestic concerns. Away from the

last settlement, they spend their time tending to their animals, cooking, looking after one another when they are ill, and – that quintessential Victorian domestic ritual – celebrating Christmas with improvised roast and pudding and a reading from the Church of England Christmas service.

The task of exploration and mapping; the scientific aim of cataloguing flora and fauna or of measuring distances with instruments; the national fanfare that marked the explorers' departure, are all superseded by the domestic chores that punctuate the travellers' progress and undermine the heroic framing of their enterprise. The fate of the expedition is ultimately determined not by scientific failure or the inaccuracy of their instruments but by the loss of such domestic staples as flour when a raft overturns in the river. Voss's own death becomes an instance of the mythologizing of domesticity into a national narrative that the narrator shares, even as he imposes a degree of irony on it. The mundane, somewhat bathetic reality of the explorer's severed head lying 'like a melon' is, in the next two sentences, superseded by a mythopoeic image: 'his blood ran upon the dry earth, which drank it up immediately' (*Voss*: 394), intimating a process of irrigation and fertilization which returns the nation to the agrarian ideal.

Laura Trevelyan's words in the novel's last chapter confirm the mythologizing of that reality: "Knowledge was never a matter of geography. Quite the reverse, it overflows all maps that exist" (*Voss*: 446). The practical purposes of Voss's failed expedition – mapping the interior and therefore opening it to trade and settlement – are reconfigured

into something that exceeds those purposes. For the explorer's death to become nationally meaningful, an official commemoration is necessary; it is organised at the end of the novel and consists of 'a fine memorial statue' unveiled in front of 'officials and their wives, to say nothing of other substantial citizens' as 'a work of irreproachable civic art' (*Voss*: 439 and 440). The ceremony is the natural successor to the similar gathering at the harbour as the explorers left Sydney. It appropriates and domesticates the hardships and conflicts of the journey into a narrative digestible at national level and as such easily promoted 'with garlands of rarest newspaper prose' and in future 'history books' (*Voss*: 440). It does not matter that Voss's fate remains unclear as competing versions of his end circulate: the significance of his death rests on its potential for national narrative. Nor does the narrator's consistent irony towards the proceedings, whether at the start or the end of Voss's journey, wholly undermine the effectiveness of these official ceremonies in their purpose of bestowing general national value onto a private and particular event since, after all, this is precisely what White's references to Voss's spilled blood do, too. In what is another aspect of *Voss*'s Neo-Victorianism, the novel displays some ambivalence between the articulation of Victorian discourses and practices in order to critique them and the acknowledgement of a debt to their enduring appeal in the twentieth century. For all the novel's implicit critique of officialdom, the historical success of the kind of proceedings fictionalised here is proven by the fact that the national narrative they produce is still current in the mid-twentieth-century context of White's writing. *Voss*, it



seems, cannot escape contributing to a specifically national, Australian understanding of identity as ‘a sense of bonding with the land’ (Bandopadhyay, 2009: 127).

Voss’s death marks the extreme and literal version of such bonding, which results in the explorer’s body and the traversed territory becoming indistinguishable to the point that, when a search party arrives in the very place where the remains of the members of the expedition lie, those remains are invisible to them. The novel’s ending reworks the appropriation of indigeneity widespread in settler narratives, whereby the settlers desire for themselves an authenticity that properly belongs to the natives and which is achieved by the kind of communion with the land that Voss’s death exemplifies. It also shows how difficult it can be to separate a Neo-Victorian critique of mythologizing settler narratives from the sustained re-articulation of those very same narratives.

### **Domesticity and settler (post)colonialism.**

White’s Neo-Victorian approach to his subject pierces the seemingly seamless text of Australia’s understanding of its own identity by revealing the ideological tensions and practical contradictions that are at the basis of any foundational narrative of settlement. Among them are: the fact that settlers define their society via the simultaneous imitation and rejection of British models; the fact that the masculine endeavour of driving into the outback is undertaken in order to facilitate the feminine accomplishment of domesticity; the fact that the historical moment of pioneering expansion is recast only as a particular

version of a timeless impulse, so that it does not have to confront the reality of its actions (not least towards the aborigines). Domesticity is an ideologically powerful tool in the settlement narrative because it carries with it inherently benign connotations as the opposite of adventure, even if in fact the ideal of domesticity developed in a British context functions as a repressive instrument of moral and social policing when transplanted to an antipodean settler society. *Voss*'s tracing of the journey of exploration into the desert by way of its existing, and variously domesticated, settlements and the novel's insistence on the performance of domesticity by the members of the expedition themselves form a Neo-Victorian rewriting of the narratives of settlement that underpinned Australia's idea of itself as a nation even in the 1950s. In place of the coherence and univocity of that story of settlement, *Voss* exposes the fragmentary nature of the settlers' enterprise and the official mystifications on which the impression of coherence depends.

Neo-Victorianism's ambivalence towards its historical referent – fetishized even as it is critiqued – and its dual allegiance to the Victorian past and the twentieth- or twenty-first century present is analogous to 'the ambivalent relationship of the white settler communities with the British metropolitan imperial centre' (Coombes, 2006: 3). On the one hand, as they were being established, settler societies defined themselves by their racial, cultural, social and institutional affinities to Britain and against 'the indigenous peoples with highly differentiated political, cultural and social structures' (Coombes,

2006: 3), not to mention skin colour. A similar superiority over the society, culture and institutions of the Victorian period is presumed in the contemporary perspective of Neo-Victorian novels. On the other hand, settlers establish their identity as Australians by emphasising communion with the native landscape and by appropriating a form of authenticity centred on the land, against the perceived effete ignorance of the imperial metropolis, even though the structures through which they understand their enterprise of settlement (the pastoral primary amongst them) are themselves borrowed from British discourses on the relationship between human settlement and nature. Neo-Victorian novels comparably desire the authenticity that is only truly available to real Victorian texts, not their self-conscious epigones. It is in the Victorian period that these conflicting allegiances began to shape Australia's articulation of its own identity in relation to the mother country (the past and origin) and the colonial settled territory (the present and destination). And it is in the 1950s, the decade when *Voss* was written, that historians first articulated conceptually the characteristics of settler societies by framing them as 'pioneering endeavours' centred on 'an exclusive encounter between the settlers and the lands they claimed' (Veracini 2013: 317).

Settlement narratives are retrospectively constructed ideological instruments that aim to validate after the fact the forcible acquisition of land, by systematically 'disavow[ing]' it (Veracini 2010: 14). Thus, the reality of violent conquest over the native population is instead displaced in favour of, firstly, the heroic taming of the elements that

establishes the settlers' worthiness as custodians of the land; and secondly, the ensuing economic success of the settlement, which suggests a providential approval of that relationship with the land. The historically specific conditions of nineteenth-century settlement (not least the existence of aboriginal inhabitants on the lands being settled) are occluded by their transposition onto timeless mythologies of the relationship between man and nature under the eye of God. With this retrospective discursive operation that denies temporal specificity to the process of settlement, settler nations arrogate to themselves a form of indigeneity they do not historically possess, not least because, ironically, they rely on imported British models of settlement for their self-realisation. *Voss's* presentation of the kinds of domesticity performed by the Bonners in Sydney, Sanderson at Rhine Towers, Boyle at Jildra, and the explorers in the desert, which are variously presented as derivative, idyllic, ruthless, or mundanely ineffective, disrupts the nexus of heroism, moral virtue, and materially successful settlement that underpin narratives of settlement.

If '[s]ettler colonialism obscures the conditions of its own production' (Veracini 2010: 14) by eliding the violence inherent in settlement on already inhabited lands and replacing it with the morally virtuous realisation of human endeavours, then its discourses are ripe for a Neo-Victorian dissection that, as Ho argues, performs a useful purpose as a corrective to conventional memorialisation of the nineteenth century and aims to 'explore how the dominant culture romanticizes, naturalizes, and authorizes narratives and

structures of empire’ and to provide ‘a critique of entrenched master narratives’ (Ho, 2012: 11) such as those of antipodean colonization. *Voss*’s exploration of various gradations of settlement, geographically defined, points to White’s reflection on Australia’s definitions of itself not just in the nineteenth century but also in the present of White’s writing. The novel performs a clear Neo-Victorian operation, facing towards the Victorian period and the mid-twentieth century simultaneously, tearing apart the discourses about the nation prevalent in both, critiquing their premises, showing up their mystifications, and yet at the same time acknowledging their enduring national commemorative appeal as compelling narratives – not least for a generation of scholars who have turned to *Voss* to find in the novel the very kind of settlement narrative (one that displaces historical specificity in favour of mythical transcendence) that White exposes as conscious obfuscation.

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<sup>i</sup> For ease of reading, all references to *Voss* will be by its title, rather than author, year: page.