

Desire and Justification in Liam Davison's "The White Woman"

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LIAM DAVISON'S NOVEL *The White Woman* (1994) depicts the story of an expedition to find and rescue a white woman believed to be in Aboriginal hands in the forests of Gippsland, Victoria, Australia, in the 1840s. In Davison's rendition of this historical episode, the framing device is that of a now-elderly member of the expedition reciting the story of that adventure to the son of a man with whom the narrator pursued the search in a second expedition after the original expedition ended. The trope of the white woman captured by Natives is well known in North American literature and criticism¹ (and paintings and films). It is less frequent in Australian literature² and does not have the same Puritan overtones as in America. Indeed, Kay Schaffer, in "Captivity Narratives and the Idea of the 'National,'" has suggested that the captivity narrative makes no sense in Australia because here convicts escaped *to* the bush.³ Some of the edge of this distinction is blunted, however, by the role that fear of seduction played in North America, and in any case, in *The White Woman*, this trope relates particularly to the opportunity to imagine (white) female perfection and justify white treatment of Aborigines.

Two themes are central to *The White Woman*: one involves the manner in which desire and imagination perfect the image of the white woman believed to be captured by Aborigines, making her a worthy icon; the second is the manner in which mirroring and projection are used by white males to paint Aborigines as savages and to identify themselves in contradistinction to those savages. The link, of course, is that rescuing the white woman would confirm the perfidy of the Aborigines (by confirming the ab-

duction) and the heroism of the white males. In addition, the successful stigmatization of the Aborigines also justifies any brutalities committed or rumoured to have been committed against them. Underlying both themes is the notion of a quest and therefore ultimately of a search for identity.

Desire and imagination are central to the expedition to rescue the white woman captured by the Aborigines—desire for the woman and desire for all that she symbolizes. In the first instance, this is desire as emptiness to be filled: the white woman is not real; she is imagined as perfect; she is perceived voyeuristically; and she is contrasted sharply with black women. In the second instance, the white woman symbolizes goodness and civilization, and conceptually she provides justification for white treatment of Aborigines.

The terminology of desire is overt in the narrator's rendition of the story: the image of the white woman "answer(ed) to our desires" (32) and "she satisfies desire" (35). But she must be imagined, and the narrator can only speculate about which lost white woman it might be (14). She does not really exist, and neither Commissioner Tyers nor the commanders of the Native Police, Dana and Walsh, believe that she exists. Even the narrator's dream of finding her is expressed in terms of assisting at her birth, indicating a process of creation:

... the familiar hump of saplings overlaid with bark, the dark womb swelling with the possibility, the hope, the certainty of Her concealed within it. And we would draw her out. We would go to it and reach our hands into the cool dark air and feel the softness of her flesh inside and bring her, wide-eyed and possibly white, blinking into the light of day. (83)

Yet the desire for her existence is so great that dubious signs of her presence in the area are confirmed (85). The Aborigines continue to tell the expedition stories about a white woman, but one is never found. Instead, the figurehead of the ship *Britannia*, battered and disfigured from shipwreck, is eventually recovered (151).⁴ In its imaginative tentativeness the expedition is a "quest" (4, 140), but substantively it is a false quest or an aborted one.

The white woman, then, is imagined. She outshines real women (35), and the narrator consistently dreams of her perfec-

tion (15, 32). Not surprisingly, his dreams about her correspond to an advertisement he has placed for a wife: "Virtuous woman of good moral standing. Nineteen to twenty-five years of age. Well groomed, fair of complexion, softly spoken . . . red or auburn haired. Maternal. Domestically inclined" (15). He dreams of her fighting off her captives (26) and rejects the idea of her seduction (32). In captivity narratives in North American literature, there is often voyeuristic participation by white males imagining the rape of "White female innocence."⁵ The emphasis here, rather, is on elevating the imagined white woman. Nevertheless, the narrator does think of the white woman's fate in terms of the cliché, "a fate worse than death itself" (37), and he does imagine her in captivity "half naked" (26, 32).

The white woman image is particularly distinguished from black women; the ability to tell the difference between white and black women by their bones (6-7), by the smell from a coat (38), and from their manner of walking (60) is asserted in different contexts. This difference is emphasized and valorized by the disgust conveyed by Commissioner Tyers when he tells the story of a rumour about a "white woman" who turned out to be a black woman whitewashed and dressed as a white (59-61). Larissa Berhrendt has praised *The White Woman* in part for attacking stereotypes of Aboriginal women; such praise is not inappropriate. In this case, however, even the narrator's retelling of Tyers's story reduces the Aboriginal woman to simply a grotesque imitation of a white woman, and in general black women are defined simply in terms of white women.

Primarily then the white woman is imagined to fulfil desire. However, she also plays a significant symbolic role. She must exist to justify white treatment of blacks, both generally (37) and for a particular massacre at the venue consequently called Golgotha (68, 71). If a white woman has been abducted by blacks, then the characterization of blacks as savages can be vindicated and white superiority confirmed. In addition, the need to find the white woman is tied to the idea of restoring civilization to the colony. (White) woman is imagined here as the embodiment of goodness and as a necessary civilizing influence, while the narrator reflects more general anxiety over degeneration from civil be-

haviour in the absence of significant numbers of respectable ("domestically inclined") white women.

The second major theme of *The White Woman* then is the reversal and projection of characteristics onto the Aborigines by white males. If the Aborigines can be labelled savages, or better yet cannibals, then any treatment of them by whites is justified and whites can identify themselves favourably in distinction from Aborigines. Demonization allows total distancing, including the distancing involved in projecting one's own worst traits onto others. Davison uses the concept of mirror images in both *Soundings* (1993) and *The White Woman*,⁶ and mirroring generally provides an image of the self as whole and unified rather than mixed or fragmented. Also, distancing via reversal, intensified by Western "binary" conceptualizing, is to deny our mixed nature and to see ourselves as totally good.

In *The White Woman*, these devices are combined with what Anne McClintock calls "the colonial journey . . . into a prehistoric zone of linguistic, racial and gender degeneration" (369) or Marianna Torgovnick has called "tropes of primitive discourse": characterizing people as "primitives" and therefore as savage (connotating violence), child-like, lascivious and so on (8-9), to which, following S. H. Alatas, should be added the notion of the "lazy native." These form the bases for stereotypes, and it is in this sense that Diana Brydon and Helen Tiffin argue that all knowledge of indigenes is precoded or "pre-knowledge," knowledge before the fact (105). Stereotyping people as savage or even as unproductive or nomadic may be used to nullify any claim they might have to the land, and thus the early effectiveness of arguments that American Natives were savage and therefore not a barrier to European "discovery" of the continent, or that because the Aborigines had apparently not cultivated Australia it was a terra nullius for European whites to "discover," however long Aboriginal people may have been living there.

Similarly, in analyzing the American situation, Eric Cheyfitz argues not only that Prospero's accusation of Caliban's desire for Miranda is "a repressed self-accusation" (162), but also that stereotypes of the Caliban type are used to repress counter facts to "necessary" myths: thus, the fact that North American Natives

had strong taboos against rape, or that it was in fact the white master who raped black female slaves rather than black male slaves who raped the masters' wives and daughters are repressed in the stereotypes of black male rapists and the Native captivity stories (161). In relation to Caliban, cannibalism is perhaps the ultimate symbol of barbarity for modern people,⁷ that which is seen as most clearly distinguishing civilized from savage people, and even the basis of distinguishing between "good" and "bad" Natives in white North American folklore.⁸

Many of these themes are taken up directly in *The White Woman*. Aborigines are referred to as "the very opposite of what we are ourselves" (36) and "dark reflections" of the whites (65), and when discovering the evidence of a massacre at "Golgotha," members of the expedition initially assume that whites have been killed by blacks (65-66). In a parallel point, Walsh tells Commissioner Tyers that the expedition is bothering the Aborigines, whereas in fact the expedition is acting as witness to the treatment of Aborigines by Walsh and his ilk (97). Similarly, the black woman in Tyers' story *was* a captive, as opposed to the non-existent captured white woman, and here again it is white males who sexually exploit black women, not black males exploiting white women.

The blacks are referred to as "savages" in newspapers (56) as well as in stories (36), and settlers tell officials stories about black pilfering to justify retribution (51). The Aborigine Bulgil-ee-nee, who allegedly has the white woman, is imaged as a "monster" and as "inhuman"—and is even left-handed (84). Here again there are desire and imagination: "Oh, yes, we felt anger, disgust, the urge for retribution . . . *at the stories of black atrocities*, but underneath it all there was the satisfaction of having our fears confirmed. They were beyond civilisation, beyond goodness" (36; emphasis added). "They" were presumably even cannibals, as indicated by "the sickening accounts of corpses baked and eaten" (36).

Primarily, then, the technique for denying equality and humanity to Aborigines that is depicted here is demonization. Nevertheless, other techniques are on display. For example, Aborigines are pushed to the background by the logic of the

narrative. White dependence on Aborigines for “exploring” the bush is conveyed in a matter-of-fact way, without an emphasis on the manner in which that dependence has usually been denied.⁹ Nonetheless, the search for the image of the white woman and for white male identity is central, with blacks having only marginal relevance.

Similarly, *The White Woman* depicts the manner in which Aborigines are infantilized as a strategy for maintaining superiority and control. Walsh claims that there is no point in members of the expedition talking to Jackie, because Jackie does not know what the truth is (118), and while this is partly designed to prevent members of the expedition from questioning the Aborigines directly, it is also clear that Walsh sees the Aborigines as infantile.¹⁰ Walsh also argues that the Aborigines will always agree with you, confirming what you want to hear. They do, of course, tell the expedition what it wants to hear about “the white woman,” but once an expedition exists, the Aborigines have little choice except to cooperate even though they know there is no captured white woman. In addition, of course, this treatment of blacks as infantile confirms their moral inferiority and justifies all white treatment of them.

As part of the reversal, while the Aborigines are demonized, they are also treated savagely. There is reference in *The White Woman* to controlling the Aborigines by means of “scientific interest” (in the case of Hartnett), but control is depicted in practice as primarily direct and violent, raising the question of who actually are the “savages.” In her ethnography of the Meratus people of Indonesia, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing raises a similar question: who are the head-hunters? The Meratus are seen as primitive and as savage “head-hunters” by central government officials, but the Meratus believe that the government itself hunts heads to use to consecrate new building developments and so on.¹¹ When looking at colonial experiences or “centre-periphery” relations generally, it may seem that those assuming the mantle of civilization have often perpetuated the greatest atrocities, and, of course, that is a major theme of postcolonial writing.

The White Woman also pursues this theme. When the expedition first arrives in Golgotha, their initial assumption is that there

has been a great massacre of whites by blacks, whereas, of course, the opposite is the case (64). Law and order have been “replaced by secrecy and guns” (22), with the police and other white males going out for recreational shootings (118-19). As indications that the law is irrelevant to white responses to the Aborigines, the rivers are “choked with bones” and one white keeps sugar “in the skull cap of a black” (22). In addition to Golgotha, such place names as Boney Point, Butcher’s Ridge, Slaughterhouse (37), and Myall Creek (43) tell their own stories. These names are especially noteworthy given the importance of naming in the process of defining a new (cultural as well as physical) landscape. These are events, however, that are not included in “history” (50, 54)—events that no one wants to know about (130). They are incidents that are known only by rumour and gossip, traditional aids to unofficial communication. But rumour may also serve the cause of official ideology, and, in *The White Woman*, rumours about Aboriginal atrocities are also necessary to the official picture of Aboriginal behavior (36), as well as forming the basis for a belief in the existence of the abducted white woman (6, 14).

If the stories of massacres of Aborigines are not recorded as history, they are written on the wind or in the landscape: “A whole repertoire of stolen sounds echoing through the still bush as if the birds bore witness to some horrifying massacre” (27-28). In a separate essay, Davison has described landscape as being “a living record of past lives that has its own stories to tell . . . a historical record, [as] a sort of palimpsest of past lives,”¹² and in his novel *Soundings*, he develops the notion that a history of perceptions of a country’s landscape might effectively serve as a history of that country.¹³ For the whites, there is also a hostility emanating from the landscape, an experience of the landscape as active and threatening—in contrast to Aboriginal experience, and in contrast to white experience of the civilized English garden—and not simply because the Australian landscape contains Aborigines.¹⁴ It is vast and inaccessible (19), creating a sense of isolation that leads to madness (7). It is characterized most frequently by silence (28, 29) and by being closed in on itself (40), or as “still and black” (78). While water can also be still, in the form of a lake (41), the enormity and hostility of ocean waves (18, 115) and the

ferocity of torrential downpours (25) also act to isolate people. The landscape functions, in fact, as a major obstacle to the expedition. Only through the gun can the whites attempt to possess the countryside, as when Warman kills two swans on the lake simply as an act of self-assertion (42), or by the possessive destructiveness of Warman's chopping down a tree to remove that section with letters carved in it (3).

Desire and imagination also relate closely to the concepts of perspective, of language, and of stories. The narrator asks: do we make our own memory and thus our own history (65), and does the combination of all perspectives add up to the whole story (2)? Is a limited perspective perhaps more functional than a more inclusive one, in so far as ignorance allows confidence (23, 9, 12)? This relates closely to the importance of stories (35, 53, 97, 98) and who gets to tell them (104, 105, 147), effectively, who controls communication and, indeed, "history" itself. Primarily it is white men who tell stories. Bunjil-ee-nee is accorded his turn (147), but it is a hollow turn and he quickly accepts the white man's terms (148).

To have language is to have power, as it allows social construction and even naming. Thus, the leader of the expedition, De Villiers, derives his importance in part from his French language, while blacks mumble (79) or have "no language" (38) and thus provoke contempt (10). The whites exercise the power of naming Aborigines both when De Villiers formally gives Aboriginal guides the names of prominent whites (including his own), and when the Aborigines are simply called Jackie as regular practice. The power of language as deployed by the newspaper is particularly effective in bringing people together for common emotional purposes, such as the expedition (4, 13).¹⁵ But the blacks are voiceless. They cannot refuse to assist the expedition even though they know there is no white woman to be found. Voiceless also, of course, are the imaginary white woman and those women who raise money to support the expedition but have no greater involvement with it. Similarly, while the competition between Walsh and the expedition is physical and even at times verging on the violent, the central question is who will be able to tell the story of what is happening in the countryside (104).

Torgovnick cites *The Odyssey* as the original quest story, involving its own manifestation of "the primitive" (Polyphemus), and consisting ultimately of a quest for identity (26). Schaffer describes (North American) captivity stories as involving women as "markers of exchange" in conflicts "between pale and dark-skinned men" ("Captivity Narratives" 4). In *The White Woman*, to the extent that the white woman is the Grail, both blacks and the landscape are only background. In addition, the major conflict is between the expedition, on the one hand, and Walsh, Dana, and even Tyers and his clerk Marlay, on the other hand, further marginalizing the Aborigines. Here it is the image of (white) woman that is at stake in a conflict between two sets of pale-skinned men. The imagined white woman is symbolic of (white) civilization and therefore justifies white treatment of blacks, paralleling the attempted reidentification and justification of whites through the process of projection/reversal by which blacks are demonized.

Like the white men who are self-defined against projected characterizations of blacks, the narrator attempts to define himself as a "good" white man differentiated from "bad" white men, with the latter category epitomized by Walsh. Some of the lessons of the narrator's story are that white men like Walsh are the headhunters; that atrocities were committed primarily against the Aborigines, not by the Aborigines; and perhaps even that there was no abducted white woman to justify white attitudes toward and treatment of blacks. The unnamed father of the narrator's audience is bracketed with Walsh for particularly harsh judgement by the narrator. But Liam Davison's judgement goes further. For one thing, the expedition itself cannot simply be contrasted to Walsh; it includes nearly the full gamut: the leader, De Villiers, who continually seems to delay the search to extend the term of his own position as leader of the expedition; Hartnett, who has a "scientific" but nonetheless controlling interest in Aborigines; through the contradictory Warman to McLeod, who is a cowardly version of Walsh. Nor is the relatively benign narrator spared, and not only because he partnered the "father" during the second expedition. As the single narrator, he attempts to control the telling and therefore the story, and to

create a favorable identity for himself, and even for that very reason he is implicated in the demonization and marginalization of the Aborigines and in the imaginative control of the white woman.

NOTES

- 1 On the trope of the white woman captured by Indians in North American literature, see especially Fiedler; Slotkin; and Berkhofer.
- 2 However, see White, *The Fringe of Leaves*, and Duggan, *The Ash Range*. On previous versions of the particular story retold here by Davison, see Davison, "The Consequences of Story."
- 3 Schaffer ("Captivity Narratives") discusses primarily the (Australian) Eliza Fraser story, which also is the subject of White's *A Fringe of Leaves*. See also Schaffer, *In the Wake of First Contact*.
- 4 McClintock identifies the placing of female figures on ships' prows as one form of the "persistent gendering of the imperialist unknown" (24).
- 5 Fiedler 93 (qtd. by Schaffer, "Captivity Narratives" 1).
- 6 In *The White Woman*, the narrator and his companion on the second expedition place mirrors out for the "white woman" to see herself in and thereby know who she is (146).
- 7 See, for example, Torgovnick 22 and the citations in her note 47.
- 8 For example, Berkhofer 28, and Cheyfitz 42. On the aetiology of "cannibalism" resulting from a linguistic confusion on Columbus's part, see Cheyfitz, and also, for example, V. S. Naipaul, *A Way in the World*; obviously Caliban is an anagram of cannibal. Pybus also alleges, in her discussion of the Tasmanian case, that tales of cannibalism by Aborigines were maintained to justify white treatment of them (53).
- 9 See, for example, Mudrooroo and Pybus on the "last days" of Tasmanian Aborigines. On the concept of "backgrounding," see Plumwood 21. On the general point that the Australian whites "discovered" sites already known to Aborigines and only with their help, see Brydon and Tiffin 46.
- 10 See Pybus 85 on the refusal of whites and especially white administrators to talk to Aborigines as rational beings.
- 11 See also Segal on the black African view that whites were cannibals as evidenced by the large copper kettles on board white sailing ships.
- 12 Davison, "Landscape with Words" 6,8; this, of course, to some degree approximates a more "Aboriginal" approach to landscape. See also Rulfo's haunting *Pedro Paramo* for the notion that village streets harbour echoes of the past.
- 13 Torgovnick tells the illustrative story of Stanley (of Livingstone fame) arriving at a beautiful harbour with island and immediately seeing it as an excellent and easily defended site for a mission station (27).
- 14 Compare, on this latter theme, Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* and Fletcher's analysis of *Remembering Babylon*.
- 15 Compare Anderson on the role of newspapers in creating the "imagined communities" of nationalism.

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