

**Elsbeth Tilley, *White Vanishing: Rethinking Australia's Lost-in-the-Bush Myth* (Rodopi, 2012)**

The theme of white settler children being lost-in-the-bush has been a recurring one in Australian literature and film. In her book, *White Vanishing: Rethinking Australia's Lost-in-the-Bush Myth*, Elspeth Tilley offers a new way of looking at this trope by incorporating postcolonial theory, including whiteness theory. This new way sees the lost-in-the-bush narratives in terms of white-vanishing, where the 'indigene' is ignored or displaced. Tilley explains the term 'indigene' as white culture's imagining of Indigenous Australians (18).

Tilley outlines the literary history of the child lost-in-the-bush narratives beginning with nineteenth-century references to lost children in novels and short stories. The first critical study of the lost-in-the-bush theme was by John Scheckter in 1981, and in 1999 Peter Pierce's *The Country of Lost Children* focused specifically on the lost child and the trope of loss of innocence in early Australian white settler society. Tilley points out that Pierce's collection also includes lost adults, and she sees a similar pattern in the depiction of both lost children and adults as representing 'an Australian anxiety' (26). Tilley, however, argues further that claiming the lost-in-the-bush trope as 'Australian' is in effect 'forgetting and displacing the non-white' (53). *White Vanishing* sets out to explore the 'missing contents' (44) or in the postcolonial sense what lies beyond the frame. What happens to the indigene in the form of 'black displacement' (55) in the lost-in-the-bush narrative is the book's main concern.

Chapter two, 'Black Displacement', includes the depiction of the black tracker in Australian literature and film. Tilley sees the literary role of this character as serving the needs of white society to perpetuate the concept of an unknown and unknowable world. The trackers are not depicted 'as humans in their own right' (73). She also points out that while the black tracker traces the lost white child, he is not seen to be the one to restore the child to its parents. Rather, white people are foregrounded at the point of rescue and return. The black tracker is often depicted as animal-like. His skills are often seen as natural, rather than skills developed through 'a learned system of knowledge' (76). Most black trackers remain unnamed. In chapter three, Tilley examines that other Australian trope, mateship, as exclusively white and where male and female are bonded together in the lost-in-the-bush stories to the exclusion of 'Indigenous sovereignty and internal diversity' (131).

The lost-in-the-bush dramatic theme of crossing temporal boundaries is, for Tilley, yet another way in which Indigenous Australians are made invisible. She explores this in 'Temporal Trouble', chapter four. Indigenous Australians live in this other world, and so they can be seen not to belong in modern Australia. In 'Entering Terra Nullius', chapter five, Tilley examines the masculine-controlled white spaces with roads and fences that keep white Australia 'safe' (203). Beyond the roads and fences are indigenes 'either passive and compliant or savage and hostile' (324). Ultimately, Tilley argues that these Australian stories are more than just stories. She concludes by posing the question of the extent to which such depictions and omissions of Indigenous Australia have affected government policy and political action.

Although Tilley claims in her Preface that the book is not about what is 'wrong' (ix) with Australian literature but more a way to examine our thinking about the value of Indigenous Australians, in her Conclusion, she posits that white society has been denied the

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opportunity to learn about bush survival methods because the lost-in-the-bush trope is premised on the hapless white person facing the unfamiliar and strange. She suggests that a different narrative would have recognised Indigenous Australians. This is true; however, had Australia, indeed, been a terra nullius, it is still likely that the lost-in-the-bush stories would have been written. We respond collectively to the terrors of being lost. The nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature Tilley explores for her theme used the lost-in-the-bush trope for dramatic effect and for that to succeed dichotomies were required. She is correct in claiming that no lost-in-the-bush text has subverted 'the empire' (328) and that 'irrational fear and strident othering' continues into modern narratives such as the disappearance of Azaria Chamberlain and Peter Falconio (329).

Tilley published some of this work in 2011 as an ejournal chapter on 'Critical Whiteness' for the Australian Critical Race and Whiteness Studies Association. Both this chapter and Tilley's book *White Vanishing* stem from her 2011 PhD thesis. I mention this only because *White Vanishing*, compared to the ejournal chapter, makes for heavy reading. The jargon is extensive and the lengthy footnotes can be overwhelming at times: footnote 34, for example, runs over two pages. The retail price is around \$170, so it is unlikely that many individual copies will be sold – copies other than to university libraries. It deserves to be converted into an ebook, so more readers can appreciate the scholarship involved.

**Dymphna Lonergan**