I'll Show You Love in a Handful of Dust: The Material Poetics of *Voss*

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I

Man is King. They hung a robe upon him, of blue sky. His crown was molten. He rode across his kingdom of dust, which paid homage to him for a season, with jasmine, and lilies, and visions of water. They had painted his mysteries upon the rock . . . (641).

Patrick White's work has consistently been recognised in Australian literary studies as crossing boundaries (see McLaren 83; Clements 133), though the final and arguably most permeable frontier *Voss* sets out across is the material. For White, the littoral zone, associated with urban Australia and the Colony,[1] is also the literal zone. The text's journey "into the dust" (460), leads us out of superficial materialism and into a gritty exploration beyond the *real,* provoked by the dry country of the inland. Given the current environmental and material turn in the humanities, White's dismissal of the realist form and the engagement of *Voss* with various non-realist traditions both literary (Romanticism and Modernism) and philosophical (such as alchemy, pre-modern philosophy, Aboriginal ontology) merits revisiting. Drawing upon existing literary criticism and thinking in the environmental humanities, I set out to explore the shifting ground of *Voss*'s material poetics, and open questions on how literature and the text can reframe and materialise new sources of intimacy with the physical realm, through stone and rock to dust.

In his review of *The Tree of Man*, A. D. Hope famously described White's writing as "pretentious and illiterate verbal sludge" (215). I would propose that "spoken dust" more strongly reflects *Voss*'s aridity, and the unstable boundary between the human and the inhuman which the text explores. James Clements has argued that the mutability of White's ideas are transmitted through his language, and thus what Hope declared as his "verbal sludge," or "spoken dust," embodies his purpose (135). And yet, it equally embodies the influence and resonance of the material upon his language and vision. In *Flaws in the Glass*, White declared that until well into his life, landscapes, places and objects meant far more to him than people did (16). This is reflected in his supreme interest in objects, detail and a belief that by "accumulating" a "mass of detail you throw light on things in a larger sense . . . [i]t creates texture" (*Flaws* 23). By gathering this granulated detail, White's story crystallises its materiality; words resemble "physical objects" (Clements 136), taking on the "resistantly elemental nature of . . . [this] material" (Collier 1). When Gordon Collier describes himself as enchanted by "the almost palpable density and enigmatic ductus of . . . [White's] language" (1), he captures both the solidity and flow of White's material world. Thus, although White acknowledged his struggles to adapt his medium to the material environment with "the rocks and sticks of words" ("Prodigal" 16), Voss's crucial breakthrough is to discover the rocks and stones, "even, were smoother for the dust" (387).

Nonetheless, White's connection to the physical and material world has largely been dismissed in the predominantly psychological readings of his work (see Grogan, "Resuscitating" 1), perhaps exemplified by *Voss*. This is despite his declaration that war-time experiences in the deserts of North Africa and the Middle East had stimulated in him a desire

to return to the Australian environments of his youth, accentuated by the "terrible nostalgia of the desert landscapes" ("Prodigal" 14). I interpret White's struggle with the "rocks and sticks of words" as the battle to meld the predominantly European literary aesthetics and poetics he inherited to the dry and uniquely Australian material environment. This difference is concisely expressed in the *The Aunt's Story*, when Australia's comparatively "bare" dryer environments are likened to those of Greece:

> "Greece, you see, is a bare country. It is all bones."
> . . . "I too come from a country of bones."
> "That is good," said Moraitis solemnly. "It is easier to see." (*Aunt's Story* 125)

The inference is that northern European environments largely have a green, aesthetically pleasing covering year-round, whereas in Australia the bones of the land, stones and even rock worn to dust, protrude from the material environment. In the European imagination, which permeates settler-colonial literature in Australia, the material environments *Voss* departs into are associated with fear, hostility and absence. Susan Hawthorne has recognised that the "[c]onnection with Eurocentricism is the simple difference in rainfall—in European imaginations deserts = fear; in an Australian imagination it could be different" (qtd. in Bartlett 119). This is perhaps best exemplified by T. S. Eliot's most enduring work, *The Waste Land*. The poem's opening projects the barren desert back onto Europe to evoke its descent into a spiritual and moral waste, declaring famously: "I will show you fear in a handful of dust" (Eliot). Although the dry interior of *Voss* is depicted as a place of struggle, White's material poetics necessarily depart from a place of outright fear, to find alternative resonances in the bare bones, the dust and stones, of the land. As White would later reflect, the "seed" of *Voss* "was sown" upon what had hitherto had the "appearance of barren ground" (*Flaws* 103). The ultimate triumph of *Voss*'s material poetics, manifested largely through Laura, is to discover not simply fear in dust, but love.

Impregnable Stone

Before an understanding of *Voss*'s mineral realm can be expanded, the limits and boundaries the novel transgresses must first be established. The realist world of colonial Sydney looks to the material for reassurances and buttresses against the natural world; their superficial relationship with stone and the mineral kingdom is based upon ideals of stability, solid foundations and impermeability. Antonella Riem has identified how this stage of the story is largely realist in nature and reality is only softly criticised (38). Voss's benefactor and Laura's father Mr Bonner typifies this relation to stone, with White emphasising that his "stone house" is an exemplar (27, 36). The Colony, in a fragile position upon the geographical and storytelling fringe of the land it is claiming, grasps at solidity, as Mr Bonner suggests, in "homes and public edifices . . . administrators and solid achievement" (56), linking the stone edifices to the ideal of stratified order the Colony seeks to impose. This superficial relation to the material world, based upon the imposition of boundaries, is emphasised by Mr Bonner finding comfort in stalking about in his "impregnable stone house" with "his smoothly ordered women" (510).

Invoking similar language, White describes the wealthy landowner Mr McAllister as being a "corner-stone" of the Colony, with a house that will "resist time indefinitely" (141). The alternate pathway which Laura and Voss will tread is foreshadowed when Laura declares to the German: "I would not want marriage with stone" (141), suggesting that she would prefer union with "sand" instead (141). The desire for solid ground is represented by the need of the population to petrify Voss, who upon departing Sydney was [for them] "already more of a statue than a man," whom they preferred "perch[ed] . . . on a column" or "cast in bronze" (197).

Despite Voss's disregard for the huddling society of Sydney, which will stimulate alternate understandings and relations to the mineral realm, even he is animated by an idea of rock-solidity, with White describing: "[o]ut of that sand . . . rose the Idea, its *granite monolith* untouched" (39; emphasis added). The monolithic "Idea" corresponds to Edouard Glissant's critique of Western myth, epic and thought[2] as being primarily animated Philosophies of the One (47), offering an enclosed (human-centric) idea of totality, so immobile that it is approachable through the staying power of the monolithic.

Despite *Voss*'s journey "into the dust" (105), which fractures the realist and humanist understanding of the material world, the Colony nonetheless attempts to stratify the explorer into their own "frail stone foundations" (51). The casting of Voss in "solid bronze" (952), signals his enclosure within the ossified, heteronormative myth. Colonel Hebden, who will search for the lost expedition of Voss, is described in similar terms by White: "[he] could have been a statue, in stone or metal, he was so detached, hence impregnable" (944). Here certain qualities of stone have been occupied by a society which desires what Jean-Paul Sartre describes as "the old yearning for impermeability . . . there are people who are attracted by the permanence of stone. They would like to be solid and impenetrable, they do not want change" (qtd. in Douglas 163). Naturally, impregnability must equally correspond to the bound, closed and sterile.

As White writes, Voss's legend will be claimed and written by "those who have been [most] troubled by it" (971). However, the reader will have been permeated by a very different journey, which fractures the façade of realist materiality and the ideal of the hermetically sealed object. Following this journey, the myth and corresponding bronze statue of Voss, Voss as hero or King, becomes reminiscent of Percy Bysshe Shelley's futilely self-memorialising ruler Ozymandias, whose legacy is reduced to a "half sunk and shattered visage" presiding over the "lone and level sands" of the desert (Shelley). The journey inland will lead the party and reader to confront the true "power of rock" (128), upon which the realist and humanist façade of the monolithic Colony will be shattered into the "kingdom of dust" (641).

The "Power of Rock"

The elemental quality of *Voss* is a consequence of White's abandoning of contemporary (realist) storytelling and conceptual modes, to seek deeper contact with his material. A starting mass, with which to begin our trajectory towards White's material centre, is the rich mineral vein embedded within *Voss*. I approach this textual lode considering *Voss* in light of Jeffrey Cohen's *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman,* seeking to unearth how the "lithic is tangled in narrative," and how the author plumbs the "petric in the human and the anthropomorphic in the stone" (12, 10). White mines not only the philosophical in the lithic, a long held intellectual tradition in Cohen's estimation (4), but as the raw material coalesces in *Voss*, there is an efflorescence of the poetic. These emergent elements have the cumulative effect of fracturing our understanding of the material. Rather than pursuing the viewpoint of a society who confuses "reality with surface" (*Flaws* 128), White is attempting to write "from the inside out" (see Marr 150).

Although all of White's characters show an "openness to the world of nature" (Vanden Driesen 5), and its materiality, it is Judd, Laura and the titular German who resonate most deeply with this world. Early in the novel Voss positions "the mineral forms . . . [as] an everlasting source of wonder," with the interplay between language and mineral, human and inhuman, confirmed by "his own name [becoming] a crystal in his mouth" (82). Other elements and minerals such as "bronze" (274), "copper" (909), "gold" (211), "amethyst" (274), "sapphire" (274), "topaz" (319), and "moonstone" (319) are a consistent source of figurative infusions. The lithic also vitalises the story with a solid mineral presence: we encounter a

country of "mineral splendours" (273), "dappled and dancing" with "quartz" (522)—one of the minerals ubiquitous in outback Australia and across the novel—while "mica" (229), "basalt" (777), and "iron" (472) add to the diversity of the deposits. Such detail informs both the figurative and the literal, allowing interflow between the two, disturbing the real. White enlists the mineral forms to challenge the boundaries of form, both material and literary.

This challenge begins with forging an unlikely union between alchemy and the Romantic. Jean-Pierre Durix illustrates White's use of alchemical codes, quoting "all vision overflowed in the liquid gold of complete union" (348; White 153), in his exploration of natural elements in *Voss*. However, Durix argues that nature is merely a symbolic map for White. James Bulman-May's *Patrick White and Alchemy* expands on the use of this symbolic language, arguing that White's "mythological simulacra" converges around "the archaic paradigm of alchemy" (2), reaching a climax in *Voss* (73). Bulman-May's study, drawing upon David Tacey's Jungian reading, primarily tracks a psychological journey of alchemical individuation, which focuses again on symbols rather than on underlying materiality, though the opportunity exists to flip the focus back to the material. Tacey references Carl Jung's "Mind and Earth" paper (21), which features intriguing psycho-materialist musings, often overlooked within Jungian readings. Jung argues that the psyche has a chthonic element which is deeply connected to and shaped by the material world (31). The sculptor Frances Baruch's paper "Jung and the Stone" traces Jung's lifelong relation with stone, culminating in his construction of a stone tower he built (largely by hand) at Bollinger over the course of twenty years as both a home and a material extension of his psyche. This intriguing relation between mind and matter suggests we might reverse the predominant "country of the mind" readings of *Voss* and White more generally, which have drawn on Jungian psychology for their underlying strata and, rather, question how White's raw material pushes back from the depths.

Discarding realism, White grasps for the fragments of other forms to represent reality and open other worlds. It is no coincidence that Cohen's background is in medieval literature: to see story in stone seemingly requires a specialist in archaic paradigms. White deploys alchemical allusions, such as when he writes, "in burning, it is the black that gives up the gold" (361), with black being the alchemical *prima materia*, or the chaos of the first elemental stage in the alchemical process (Bulman-May 6). In the nineteenth century world of the novel and indeed in 1950s Australia, "black" might well represent the antithesis of realist and rational thinking and the scientism of inert materiality. This materiality, and the humanism which defines its limits, does not survive the journey inland, but rather the reader must face the "abdication . . . [of] Man . . . [his] gold, tarnishing into baser metals" (823).

Key to the efflorescence of the poetic out of the material of *Voss*, is White's infusion of Romantic textures. Romanticism was itself a reaction against the beginnings of modernity, turning instead to nature, radical subjectivity and the medieval (and the "exotic" not unlike how Modernism would turn to "primitive" ideas), finding here a conjunction with the alchemical. Writing to his editor Huebsch, prior to the publication of *Voss* in September of 1956, White likened the novel's aesthetic to the marriage of "Delacroix and Blake" (qtd. in Marr 314). Rather than simply being a Romantic lamentation upon ruins and the finitude of human life, a Blakean encounter offers the possibility to see realms of possibility in inert matter, to confront the inconceivably large in the insignificantly small: "To see a World in a Grain of Sand . . . [and] Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand" (Blake; see also Vanden Driesen, "Heaven').

German Romanticism presents itself as another important fragment, the literature of which White describes having become "obsessed" with in the 1930s (*Flaws* 39; see also Nicholls), with the Leichhardt inspired Voss the crystallisation of these remnants. Not only does Romanticism open the forces of the inhuman on the epic scale (the sublime) but it offers an alternative frame (of connection) through which to encounter the material world, though

like the novel its traditional form is destabilised and, as Angus Nicholls notes, "brought undone by Australian conditions" (55).

The Romantic influence upon *Voss* merits renewed study, as the movement gains renewed assessments by environmental writers and theorists. Amitav Ghosh and Timothy Morton both consider Romanticism as a site of defiance of the modern partitioning of the human and the natural (117; 47–49). Kate Rigby has identified how Romanticism importantly repositioned the human as part of nature, akin to Morton's "mesh" (65), and has recently completed work on how certain Romantic counter-modern tendencies might even assist the decolonial project (see Cooke). When White asks the reader, "[is] not the poetry of topaz or moonstone more nostalgic than that of diamonds?" (319), he might well be growing elegiac not only about unknowable mineral depths, but about the lost forms of material understanding which treasured them.

Whether we consider White as a modernist or not (high, late or otherwise), we can acknowledge that while Romanticism was the reaction against modernity that would predate the Victorian age, Modernism would be the reaction that followed and partially (re)turned to the Romantics. Echoing the colonial reaction to the arid interior of Australia, J. M. Coetzee has shown that in South Africa the dry hinterland beyond the Colony was associated with the figure of the waste land (50), recalling Eliot's poem. Where Eliot saw the outward looking fear of the waste land reflecting onto Europe, White offers his "kingdom of dust" as the inevitable failure of the paradigms that would make an aesthetic waste of Australia's inland. It is the crumbling of realist and humanist pretensions encompassing the material and natural world, dominated by Eurocentric dreams of "Palladian façade[s] and emerald turf" and the monolithic, all consuming "Idea" (557, 89). Out of that dust, alternative resonances must be found.

Although largely and necessarily exterior to Voss and White's understanding, the First Nations presence in *Voss* offers another fracture within the realist understanding of objects. Cohen describes how "Indigenous epistemologies [can] often frame worldly relations in ways productively different from contemporary scientism" (7), and I read the First Nations relation to the natural and material world in *Voss* as offering another potential rupture with these ideas. Tyson Yunkaporta explains how in Aboriginal ontology no concept of inert matter exists, instead knowledge is stored in "every waterway and every stone," which are considered animate and sentient (24–25). This enlivened understanding and relation to matter is suggested by the description of Dugald and Jackie "twinning" with the dust (411). The presence of Jackie and Dugald in the novel positions the possibility to connect with the material world on a deeper level, leading Voss to ponder that perhaps even the "dust is not impenetrable and . . . can be interpreted after hours of intimacy" (367). Upon the prospect of such intimacy Voss is "translated" into a deep time scale, "his black trousers appear[ing] to have been sculptured for eternity" (368).

Durix interprets this as a more sensual form of understanding (348), though Yunkaporta maintains that in a First Nations world view humans, trees, stones, and material objects all contain knowledge, story and pattern (29). In some respects, Western science has been catching up to these ideas, as the quantum scale has revealed that at the granular level material reality is defined by interaction and information (see Rovelli 213–14). On a more human scale, this interaction might be represented as footprints tracking across the sand, the material resonances the party leave as they ride on "above the dust, in which they were writing their own legend" (370). Another demonstration of this material residue could be letters inscribed across page, like the "black ink" in which Voss records "in exquisite characters and figures . . . the legend" (194), or the "the L of happiness" he desires to "contribute to the rock drawings" in the powder of "warm ochre" (276).[3] In this sense writing can be viewed as knowledge embedded in the material through our interaction with it, and reading as essentially a product of our ability to detect patterns and details, to read story in the material.

Another essential element that allows White to materially ground his storytelling, is his conception of the sacred, acknowledged by Bill Ashcroft as White's "earthed sacred" (26)—a conception of sacred surfaces as another salient steppingstone beyond the boundary of rational and realist materialism, drawing upon mythic signification from the Bible. It is often assumed that the mythic and mythopoetic are diametrically opposed to Christianity and monotheism; rather they form a central component (particularly in the Hebrew Bible) detectable in, for example, the interchangeability of God with "Stone" and "Rock" (Gruenwald 428). This language is a rocky remnant from the embedded storytelling tradition of Judea.

When author Herman Melville travelled to Jerusalem, he was famously disappointed. Having held North American expectations of the Promised Land, he became almost comically disenchanted in the material reality of dust and stones: "no wonder that stones should so largely figure in the Bible. Judea is one accumulation of stones" (89). The author's experience echoes the shattered dreams of settlers and explorers who sought an inland paradise in Australia, which White vaguely references as the "dream of gold or some inland sea" (211), but equally shows how White might draw upon such a tradition to go beyond Eurocentric bounds. The party will leave behind the "emerald green turf" (557) of the colonial dream. Ghosh positions the Hebrew Bible within epic narrative traditions from across the globe, quoting theologist Michael Northcott's finding that at "the heart of Judaism is a God who is encountered through nature and events rather than words or texts" (109–10). White's God is undoubtedly of the Old Testament, a way to perceive force in the elements. The "perpetual ride" of Judd's party through the "[d]ust of presage" meets its conclusion on the ramparts of the land's rocky "citadel," a "molten pyramid," with Judd begging "God" to take him into "His rocky bosom" (914, 921, 922). Perceiving God in the endurance of stone, the raw inhuman "power of rock" (128), provides a mass of material intimacy.

Using such doubling, White dematerialises the inhuman qualities of stone into the characters of Judd and Voss. Their clash becomes elemental, of lithic density and immovability: "for rock cannot know rock, stone cannot come together with stone, except in conflict" (292). The formation of each character is excavated in greater depth, with Judd possessing the "stoicism" of stone (Edgecombe 13), as opposed to Voss who was in "the nature of a second monolith, of more friable stone, of nervous splinters, and dark material deposits, the purposes of which were not easily assessed" (292). White's complex mining of the mineral here goes beyond simplistic representation of stone, burrowing into its potential for "transience and dissolution" (Edgecome 13), exploring its mystery and perhaps unknowability as an "undisclosed void" or secluded "geode" (Edgecombe 13) of the under lands.

Following the line of this poetic lode, Judd's elaboration in mineral terms gains further complexity breaking out of the simplistic association with stasis and stability (linked to the world of the Colony and realist novel). Voss perceives Judd as a "union of strength and delicacy" leading the "explorer . . . [to recall] finding on his previous journey a mass of limestone, broken by nature into forms that were almost human" (134). Seeing the human in the mineral, and the mineral in the human destabilises these borders in a way further deepened by the specific qualities of limestone. Limestone can be both a soft and hard rock and is soluble in water, suggesting Judd's union with the material world. Furthermore, limestone is itself a "mineral cemetery" (Cohen 20) of aquatic life, the inorganic formed by the material remains of the organic. Jane Bennett has noted that in fact one of the key developments in organic life, was to incorporate the lithic, in the form of bone, to give structure to weak fleshy beings, quoting Vernadsky's assertion that: "[w]e are walking, talking minerals" (11). Indeed, when we acknowledge that someone has backbone, we are really magnifying their mineral core. In hewing Judd out of this mineral, White not only disrupts the boundary between the human and inhuman, he also draws upon a deep sedimentation of past material entanglements.

If I were to compare the dialogical nature of White's materiality and engagement with the inhuman to a mass, it would be clastic in formation, friable and splintered, like a rock waiting to burst back into dust. As with the fabled philosopher's stone, the promise of perfect unity had been a myth, fragmenting, corroding: "Gold, gold, gold, tarnishing into baser metals" (383). For White the "controlled monochrome of reason" (*Flaws* 38) corresponded to the realist novel, the monolithic and monolingual Colony,[4] and its foundational precepts which define the material and mineral world as inert. White's materiality in *Voss*, quarries under these foundational pillars, reducing its implied stability to dust.

Dust and Love and Strife

Life starts afresh with each fresh journey, even into the dust (460).

Given White's engagement with archaic paradigms, I propose to explore his fragmented materiality in *Voss*, associated with both dust and love, in light of Empedocles's ancient theory of love and strife. In Empedocles's philosophy the elements are attracted and held by philia *φιλία* (love) while simultaneously opposed by the unceasing and destructive dynamism of neikos *νεῖκος* (strife), conceptualising a cosmos which is in a constant oscillation between diversity and unity.[5] Cohen's chapter "Geophilia" (love of the rocky earth) perceives Empedocles's love as "material magnetism and cosmic glue" which is forever pulling and binding, perceivable in stone, in opposition to the "entropy" of strife (25). In contrast, White's love is associated with the fluid, free flowing dust, akin to Empedocles's strife, which disperses and scatters, though White's formation of love troubles the boundary between both.

Like other Presocratic philosophers, Empedocles believed that form was important and wrote in his work essentially in the form of "picture poems" (of which, rather aptly, we have only fragments) with the aim of conveying an understanding the physical world (Macauley 108). Empedocles also provided the first complete conception (as we understand it today) of the traditional Greek elements, the fourfold *prima materia* which David Macauley argues continuously unfold across philosophical and literary history, notably including alchemical speculation and more modern poets such as Blake and Eliot and Ezra Pound (14). To return to a Presocratic thinker such as Empedocles, is to return to the ancestries of these resonances, where thought moved freely across all domains and thinking was not straightjacketed into disciplines but rather remained embedded in the material and the natural. John Rist quantifies the difference further:

> We may identify a paradoxical situation: Ancient thinkers evince little overt concern for the environment, while normally possessing a mental universe in which they have the resources for justifying such concern, while we moderns often exhibit concern for the environment but have few theoretical resources on which such concern can be grounded. (qtd. in Macauley 6)

The implication is that we are grounded in something vastly different than our natural and material reality. Empedocles appears an apt frame of reference through which to assess White's materiality in *Voss*, as we flow like dust between the philosophical, the mineral and the literary.

Love is often associated by White's protagonist with Laura, with the L he desires to write in "warm ochre" representing the merging of the two. Laura is on her own journey towards the material via the corporeal nature of her own body (see Grogan, "Resuscitating'). This connection unearths itself when the prospect of receiving a letter from Laura leads Voss to undergo a revelatory alteration in his perception, becoming "absorbed . . in his discovery: that each visible object had been created for the purposes of love, that the stones, even, were smoother for the dust" (387). Suddenly, through his lens of embodied love, Voss is prompted

to perceive love, even in the harsh and dry desert dust of Australia's interior, as a force underlying the very purpose of the material world. In relating love with the free flowing, White offers a counter to the idea of love as a binding agent, interpreting it as a fluid force which is nonetheless connecting in its intimacy. Contrastingly, while engaging with Empedocles, Cohen's "Geophilia" argues that this love is apart from the human, and it pulls, binds and gathers in response to "strife's atrophy" perceiving instead attachment and connection as the basis of matter's existence (27). Cohen's "Geophilia" is bound to stone, White's in the dust. White's love is unbound, unattached in a material sense, yet it does touch, shape and connect. There is an implication that each object exists to connect, that this force, this love, this dust, is essential to the nature of matter.

Aesthetically the smoothing of stone appears a heart-warming analogy, akin to love smoothing the rocky ego or the selfish pride of the human. Yet, the actual smoothing of stone represents a rather chaotic and catastrophic process, entailing the destruction and removal of connected matter from the greater whole. Yes, it touches, but with that touch it grinds and abrades, wearing away and shaping. However, that new aesthetic form shaped by touch, moulded by destruction and fashioned by the complex processes of the land is undoubtedly one considered more beautiful, through a human lens at least. A smoothed stone bears the mark of chaotic interaction yet finds itself more aptly adapted to its surroundings, as water, wind and dust flow over its rounded surface.

This smoothing of stone by particles is a geomorphological process called corrasion, where wind-borne granules enact erosion. In many parts of arid Australia this is the primary form of erosion. White's connection between love and dust is therefore enmeshed in arid environments. Although Cohen shows the life and vitality in stone, which even allows for its transformation into dust, the fact that his "Geophilia" is embedded in stone and White's in dust, offers an intriguing analogy to the diverging knowledge systems they emerged from. Stone suggests the stability (or perhaps stasis) of European knowledge, while dust suggests that this knowledge (which White nonetheless necessarily engages with) is being destabilised and dematerialised, in a process that is carrying us towards, perhaps, a postcolonial and posthuman[6] (yet intimate[7]) horizon.

This connection between language, thought and the material environment is acknowledged in the ancient Greek word for the elements, *stoicheia*, also being translatable as letters of the alphabet, suggesting they are not simply ideas unfolding out of an intellectual past, but out of a material reality the human mind finds itself embedded within. Dust is not as prevalent in the wetter climes of Europe, and thus harder to ground one's thoughts in ("dry as dust" is an expression which carries a bias out of such regions). And yet, White's summoning of love out of dust, suggests not the diametrical opposition of stone and dust, that ancient conflict between the immovable object and an unstoppable particle force, but rather that the stones are in fact "smoother for the dust" (387), interconnected beneficiaries of a dynamic material environment.

White's conception of this seemingly transcorporeal[8] force of love, is thus not antagonistic to Empodocles's or Cohen's love, but rather a reformation and regathering. In *Voss*, love, or dust, indeed represents the chaotic and strife-riven, yet by its very unbounded vitality it connects and touches all. In dust there is both love and strife, or perhaps it would be better to say there is love in the strife of dust.

Laura and the Final Crumbling

The connection between love and dust arises at another critical juncture in the story, crucial to Laura's alignment with the materiality of the country. As Bridget Grogan has identified, the character of Rose is essential to Laura's material engagement through the corporeal (6), crucial

to her departure from the German's viewpoint. Laura becomes increasingly associated with the material earth, which recalls the origin of the word "matter" itself, derived from the Latin *mater* for mother, source and substance (Lay 50). Tacey has argued that "part of us comes alive when we return to the mythic personifications that scientifically-based education has dispensed with" (11), an attitude I do not disregard when reading *Voss*, because of its potential to enliven our material reality. The pivotal moment in Laura's journey towards the material is the death of Rose, and her final transcorporeal transition into matter, as she is buried in the Sand Hills during an "indescribable day, of heat, and cloud, and wind" (516). The gravity of Rose's death and transition, propels Laura into an out-of-body experience in which she enters "into wind, earth and ocean . . . nowhere and everywhere at once… destroyed, yet living more intensely" (518).

As part of this experience Laura suffers the perceived dematerialisation of her own body, and as she later reflects in a letter to Voss, she feels that part of her has passed *into* the land itself (516).

> After the first shock of discovery, it had been exhilarating to know that terrestrial safety is not assured, and that the solid earth does eventually swirl beneath the feet. Then when the wind had cut the last shred of flesh from the girl's bones, and was whistling in the little cage that remained, she began even to experience shrill happiness, to sing the wounds her flesh would never suffer. Yet such was their weakness, her bones continued to crave earthly love, to hold his skull against the hollow where her heart had been. It appeared that pure happiness must await the final crumbling, when love would enter into love, becoming an endlessness, blowing at last, indivisible, indistinguishable, over the brown earth. (508)

Human love is characterised here as earthly love (that is not love of the earth), bound up inevitably in the self and the body. Morton identifies the potentially problematic nature of this love: it is narrow, exclusive, and self-chosen (96). The relinquishing of her fleshly body, her reduction to a material essence, is almost a relief, but such is the conceptual power of the human, that even her bones "crave" the earthly love of Voss (who would place himself on the glittering throne above the land), grasping onto some embodied memory of the self as even the body's material remains clutch his skull. It is only in the final and absolute dissolution of the human, the final crumbling of the self and its material essence, that human love can enter into inhuman love, when dust can enter into dust, and join its endless, boundless intimacy, "blowing at last, indivisible, indistinguishable, over the brown earth."

When White writes of the "final crumbling" his words carry symbolic meaning, yet they do have a literal basis. The end of days in a geological sense would be the ceasing of tectonic movement and of uplift, leading to the forces of destruction overtaking the forces of renewal and a flattening of the land and a filling in of the rivers, lakes and seas. Without the renewal of uplift, there remains only the destructive forces of the elements which slowly wear down the mountains and hills. This is essentially the process by which the geologically stable interior of Australia has been eroded and flattened over time, the source of its great deposits of dust. In this "kingdom of dust" (641), humanist man and his reason, the monolithic "Idea" has been eroded by a "most irrational country" (912).

Instead of the mere destruction and fragmentation the Modernists would have perceived in this scene, or the lamentation over the tombs and dust of man the Romantics would surely have eulogised, we are confronted by the divergence in White's poetics. Laura, in the "final crumbling" and the prospect of material and intellectual destruction, finds, not simply obliteration, but love (508). The love White here posits, uniquely rises from the interconnected journey of Voss and Laura "into the dust" of the arid inland (460). This "pure happiness," is fragmentary and diverse, though multiplicity does not indicate isolation, fragmentation does

not necessitate disconnection; it is in fact the grounds for a more intimate connection, not grounded at all in fact or "earthed" in a traditional sense of the word, but completely unbound. It is as though White's rejoinder to Eliot's famous line, and the stratified aesthetics and poetics from which it derives, is to find not fear, but love in a handful of dust.

NOTES

[1] Coetzee has identified the Colony as the place of culture and order in white South African writing, an idea that resonates with White's depiction of colonial Sydney and the movement beyond its bounds, both geographically and aesthetically (50).
[2] In which "causation is filiation, fixed linearity, toward projection, project" (47).
[3] Leichhardt often carved or burnt "L" into trees to mark the expedition's passage.
[4] "This supposedly sophisticated country is, alas, still a colonial sheep-run" (*Flaws*, 232).
[5] There are notable similarities between Empedocles's Love and Strife and the conception of Yin and Yang, which arose in the East approximately concurrently.
[6] If we consider "human" to be something akin to Foucault's conception of "man" as a recent and European humanist creation in *The Order of Things*.
[7] Reference to both Ashcroft et al.'s *Intimate Horizons* and Cohen's call for "material intimacies" (9).
[8] Defined by Stacy Alaimo as "the complete enmeshment of the physical body in the wider environment" (238).

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