

The Eco-Centric Self and the Sacred in Xavier Herbert's *Poor Fellow My Country*

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Although John Gorton as Minister for Arts/Prime Minister had created the conditions for its publication, the moment of Xavier Herbert's *Poor Fellow My Country* (hereafter *PFMC*), published with fanfare in 1974, was hyper-nationalist and Whitlamite (Macdonnell 10-11). The novel had experienced an immensely long gestation over almost three decades since 1937 (Herbert, De Groen and Pierce). From the 1930s when Herbert began to be published, many Australian symbols resided in the pastoral industry, which had made Australia rich. The outback, although not representative of lived realities for the majority of Australians, was the trade currency, and legitimised as iconic in the academy. The subject-matter of *PFMC* constituted a response to the changing prominence of Indigenous affairs. But it is the foundation of One People Australia League in 1961 which brought educational opportunities to Aboriginal people; the Gurindji strike at Wave Hill for equal pay in 1966; the enthusiasm for Aboriginal full citizenship expressed in the referendum in 1967, and Charles Rowley's important books exposing colonialist Indigenous policies and history (*Outcasts in White Australia; The Destruction of Aboriginal Society*), that were all preconditions for the novel's enthusiastic reception.

In retrospect, 1974 was a watershed moment which, although it may have secured the novel in the public imagination, also ensured its subsequent unfashionableness. The iconic symbols of bush nationalism—the rough-as-guts bushmen that *Crocodile Dundee* exploited—were being replaced by a new confidence in urban cosmopolitanism. As de Groen makes clear, Whitlamism, and before it Gorton's ministry, with their exuberant support for the Arts made Herbert's *magnum opus* possible, and indeed a *cause célèbre*. The novel's theatrical offensiveness, its (admittedly qualified) left-wing politics, feisty pro-Aboriginalism, and canny marketing pitched at lower-than-middlebrow and nationalistic readers (ironic in view of Herbert's capitulation to an English publisher whom he courted assiduously) (De Groen 244-5) also contributed

to its almost instant status as a classic. However its prodigious length—at 850,000 words, one third longer than *War and Peace* (Clancy 109)—and its *longueurs* (it invites a blue pencil), probably put it in that select class of books people know a lot about, and avoid reading. I propose to argue, however, that *PFMC* is remarkably of our moment even more than of its own, and in particular to read it as an astute proto-post-colonial text (though it is not repeatable and certainly not politically correct). Further it offers a subversive version of the nation and a radical take on the sacred in Australian lived realities by linking ecological concerns and the sacred in powerfully unexpected ways, in the process challenging atomistic western paradigms.

PFMC is not a novel which is amenable to aesthetic readings. It sharply divides critics (Monahan 3), being as easy to fault on aesthetic grounds for its crankiness, preachiness and polemics (Daniel; Clancy; McLaren and Herbert), as it is to marvel at its epic scope and ambitious canvas. While I admire Sean Monahan's excellent recuperation of *PFMC* as a text which properly belongs, according to Northrop Frye's taxonomy, in the generic categories of Anatomy and Romance, my project is a less formalist and a more politically inflected one that is designed to tease out the links between politics, the sacred and Indigenous-influenced understandings of land. In this paper, I aim to locate the text at the beginnings of an important new discursive formation in which bush nationalism is redefined to take cognisance of the reality of Aboriginal contact history, and in particular Aboriginal participation (on their terms, to some extent) in the pastoral industry. I shall argue that the text marks a moment in which European intellectual curiosity about the Indigenous sacred and cosmology moves into dialogic mode and productively emerges from exclusively anthropological discourses. In Herbert, this curiosity and his political passion find expression in a sense of poetic wonder that is simultaneously fired and grounded in a materialist politics by the tragic injustices of the whole gamut of colonialist bureaucracies in which Indigenous interests were imbricated. In retrospect, and especially in the light of new eco-philosophical discourses and subsequent Indigenous oral histories and testimonies, *PFMC* recommends itself as extraordinarily visionary for its time. And despite its many absurd postures, rigidities and manoeuvres, it can be read as offering a radically new formation of the sacred in Australian literature.

THE REFERENTIALITY OF HERBERT'S NOVEL AND SOURCE MATERIAL

Without romanticising Herbert, or claiming for him more vision than he possessed (De Groen's biography offers many cautions about his racism and misogyny), *PFMC* was revolutionary on a number of fronts, including on

race and race policies, and on ecological matters. It also has a great deal to offer contemporary debates about the possibility of Indigenous-influenced European understandings of the earthed sacred.

Herbert's radical views on race derived from both a variety of sources, and also from lived experience. He occupied a marginal and ambivalent place in the colonialist Northern Territory in the 1920s, '30s and '40s. His inability to secure continuing work within the Indigenous industries was literature's gain. His work across a number of industries and institutions gave him access to the gamut of colonial institutions and insider knowledge of their contact policies and history, which he metamorphosed into satire and polemics, and more importantly anatomy (Monahan). Herbert had first hand experience of a range of settler/indigenous lived realities:¹ he engaged in a variety of labouring jobs including mining alongside Indigenous men, worked as a pharmacist in the hospital treating Aboriginal patients, and was superintendent for a short time of the Kahlin compound in Darwin, the Aboriginal reservation to which mixed descent children were brought. He was also close to the McGinness family, a Kungarakan family whose mixed race children were taken into custody by the Aboriginal Protection Society and one of whose children, Val, became the real-life counterpart for Norman and Prindy. He also befriended professional Territorian Bill Harney whose first-hand knowledge of traditional Aboriginal culture was extensive, if of the red-neck variety (he had an Aboriginal wife, and lived a liminal white/black life). Herbert was also involved with Percy Tresize in locating long lost Aboriginal rock-art, and through Percy came to know Dick Roughsey, a Lardil artist and writer. Herbert was also a soldier in the North Australia Observer Unit in the Roper Bar area during the Second War alongside anthropologist W. E. Stanner, whose brainchild the Unit was, serving in the company of Indigenous soldiers whose local knowledge many times saved the Unit. This was during a period in which Stanner was collecting data for his great work on Aboriginal Religion (Stanner and University of Sydney). Although Herbert pillories Stanner's Britishness and lack of soldierly skills in the figure of Fabian Coote, in the period he was writing *PfMC* he nonetheless consumed as much as possible of his and other anthropologists' writings, including runs of *Oceania*, the work of Ronald and Catherine Berndt, and A. P. Elkin. This rich variety of sources, and his fortunate failure to become a member of the Indigenous bureaucracy, transformed him into a proto-post-colonialist promulgating reform of the Aboriginal welfare system and ideas about the Aboriginal sacred and its uses for white Australia. He belongs to that class of cultural relativist who was prepared to acknowledge the limitations of his own culture (and aware

that Aboriginal people shared this view) and the complexity of Aboriginal culture (*PFCM* 117) in an era when the latter was rarely appreciated.

MIXED DESCENT AND THE RACIALIZED SELF

PFCM grew out of an abandoned manuscript fiction entitled *Yellow Fellow*, and the title points to one of Herbert's most radical manoeuvres—to contest the normative mainstream prejudices about mixed-descent liaisons that pertained in the 1930s and '40s in Australia. The 'problem of the half-caste' as it was routinely referred to (McGregor 134-41), was imbricated in now-outdated nineteenth-century race theory. Government policy in the period (1920s to 1940s) which Herbert was documenting was highly contradictory about the 'half-caste problem'. While there were differences in legislated definitions of Aboriginality between the states, in practice Aboriginality was defined as conservatively as possible and denied to those with one black parent (or less). Paradoxically, such people, theoretically deemed to be white, were increasingly brought into the ambit of Aboriginal legislation because of fear of the rate at which the 'half-caste' population was expanding (McGregor 135). They were, however, treated as not fully white, unless they could obscure their parentage and pass as white, thereby evading the intrusive legal and welfare systems.

Herbert, refusing the problematics of 'miscegenation', argued passionately for a proudly Creole nation. The contemporary mainstream European view was of an abject creole; someone who had the advantages of neither 'race' and the 'defects' of each, and who was not acceptable to either. To resist dysgenic views of interracial liaisons and to have grasped the positive potential of intermarriage in the tropical zone are to imagine a very different de-racialised engagement between the European mainstream and Indigenous Australia. It is also to think in ways that more closely resemble how his Indigenous peers thought about mixed race sexual relations—scenarios whereby 'a blackfella can be a whitefella or a blackfella; a whitefella and a yellafella [i.e. mixed descent] can likewise be a blackfella, but a yellafella can never really become a full whitefella' (personal oral communication with Yanyuwa elder, Annie Karrakayn, December 2002). Karrakayn uses the terms *yellafella* and *halfcaste* not as terms of abuse nor does she construct them as less than herself. Herbert's reinscription of the mixed descent type begins clumsily in the discourse of eugenics. Refusing the designation of a mixed descent person as 'physically evil', ugly and uncivilisable—Daisy Bates's view and that of many of Herbert's contemporaries (Bates 68, 72, 163; McGregor 128-31)—Herbert argued that physically beautiful people are rare in any race, but that children of

Aboriginal/European alliances are particularly so: 'the perfect symmetry of the Aboriginal face makes up for the lack of it in the average white face' (*PfMC* 110).

This distasteful eugenics discourse is, however, accompanied by a rather more penetrating analysis of the mutually demeaning conditions under which such liaisons were conducted:

In my opinion a beautiful breed of people could have been created if only our forefathers'd had the courage to breed with the Aborigines like men, instead of like dirty little boys [. . .] and one that would have loved the land because they truly belonged to it. (*PfMC* 110)

Herbert's views on sexuality owed a great deal to the new sexology and to an ill-digested Freudianism (and perhaps scientism) which disdained moral framings of sexual practice. He risked offence by realistically representing and naming, for example, transmission of STDs as genocidal (*PfMC* 491-2). And he interestingly challenged what was difficult for Europeans to acknowledge: that white men might find Aboriginal women sexually attractive (and the attendant implication of the low moral standards of white men), and that Aboriginal women affirm their own personal and sexual power (understood in magical/ritual terms within their own cultural frameworks as the operation of *charada*, 'love magic', specifically women's love/power songs) by seducing white men (1293). Such notions challenge sexual, gender identity, perceived class differentials, and cultural norms simultaneously. Further, the point about the possibilities of creating a proudly hybrid Australian goes to the heart of the despair and shame which still surround discussions of the Stolen Generation, most of whom were the unclaimed offspring of settler European men. Jeremy, Herbert's ventriloquial dummy, pontificates:

'Have you ever thought what the Australian nation would have been like if the pioneers had succoured their hybrid offspring, had given even a little of the care they gave their stock . . . stead of letting them starve to death on the withered breasts of mothers starving because that very stock had destroyed the hunting grounds, or else were murdered in the camps when seen as pale-skinned monstrosities visited on them by devils. [. . .] We'd have been a Creole Nation [. . .] we'd've had that uniqueness to contribute to the world, in music, literature, politics . . . instead of being just lousy copies of the stock we came from [. . .]

I do declare that all of us bushmen would have mated frankly with Aboriginal women, but for those prudish harridans, our Irish, Scotch, Welsh, and English mothers, sisters, aunts, cousins . . . all of them. They only have to see you treating an Aboriginal woman like a human being to raise the cry *Gin Jockey* . . . and we bolt like bandicoots at the howl of a dingo.' (53-4)

Although Herbert is not reflective about the misogyny of these comments, the action of the novel reinscribes a counter-orthodox dynamic of race relations. It entails a grandfather, Jeremy Delacy, acting *in loco parentis*, precisely because the real father, his own son, will not acknowledge his progeny and cannot recognise his beauty of soul and potential as a human being. Further, Jeremy is represented as being in a mutually respectful, eroticised relationship with an Aboriginal wife, Nanago. The boy Prindy is constructed as a preternaturally gifted child, competent beyond his years in a variety of cultures, as handsome in a suit as in the buff, and as competent in Western learning as in Aboriginal learning. It is significant that Prindy is competent in both domains, but Herbert's more insistent point is that whitefellas have a responsibility to learn Aboriginal ways of thinking about land, or be defeated by the special conditions of the Top End and unworthy of land ownership, a case I will argue in detail below.

Herbert's race politics, though old-fashioned in their essentialism and focus on blood, are nonetheless suggestive of a path not taken in the Australian imaginary, until manifested recently in some groundbreaking fiction and life-writing (Miller; Mahood) and more commonly in the new history/historiography of the pastoral and missionary industries (Rose; Loos; Foster; Baker; Crawford and Walsh; Evans; Foster, Attwood et al; Goodall; Hill; Jebb; Kidd; McGrath; Riddett; Roberts; Stevens, Petty et al.; Strang; Watson). Prof. W. E. H. Stanner in his Boyer Lectures for the ABC in 1967 had identified pastoralism as the 'great wrecker' of tribal life with its legacy not only of dispersal of Indigenous people but also its sexual and welfare fallout, in the way it dispossessed and dispersed Indigenous people. He noted the sexual legacy of pastoralism, and argued that acknowledgment of the Stolen Generation was taboo because of the iconic place of bush nationalism in Australian culture (Stanner).

This silence identified by Stanner was maintained until the 'Stolen Generation' report was published in 1997. After a long period of invisibility in historical discourses, which Stanner refers to as 'the great silence' (22-9), the new historiography began charting the dynamics of the pastoral industry's impact in the 1970s and gathered momentum from the '80s onwards (works cited above, and Giblett; Griffiths; Huggins, McGrath and Saunders; Marshall and Lawford; May; Nicholson; Pedersen and Woorunmurra; Read and Coppin; Read; Reynolds; Rosser; Rowley). These works offer a more nuanced account than Stanner would have expected. They document both the cruelty and genocidal activities of the pastoralists. More significantly, they also argue Aboriginal collaboration, even complicity, with the pastoral industry on

their own terms, especially in relation to the preservation and enactment of culture. It is undoubtedly true, though, that these debates may not have penetrated far beyond academe, except of course in that dangerous formation referred to in the mainstream media as the 'history wars', or the 'black armband' version of colonial history, which again work to absolve hegemonic males of responsibility. Herbert's novel presciently anticipates the more Indigenous-centric new post-colonial histories, and one wonders why his novel was not more potent in changing the direction of the debate. His satire may have a great deal to answer for, and this paper aims to refocus what Monahan identifies as the Romance elements of the text (Monahan 141-52), in particular Herbert's representation of mixed-race identity and his grasp of how Indigenous mythological narratives could animate westerners' understanding of the Australian land.

Although Herbert was certainly practising a discourse of race that essentialised and fetishised blood, in line with the wider thinking of the period in which *PfMC* is set, he nonetheless represented a new direction in thinking about race in Australia. Instead of thinking of mixed descent as a liability and a diminishment, he promoted the future of Australia as being dependent on it, and indeed on multiculturalism. Deploring the accepted Government policy of Detribalisation (31), he advocated Land Rights, but also, and more confrontingly, a 'Guilt Tax' designed to 'square' the 'primary guilt' of land theft (1035).

Further, Herbert's democratic take on the realities of mixed race in the remote Northern regions partakes in a utopian discourse of multiculturalism. In pursuit of his multicultural agendas, the novelist takes a violently anti-British, even anti-nationalist stance. Prindy, the golden boy, the Aboriginal son of an Australian pastoralist-settler, enacts the utopic possibilities of the re-inscription of the mixed-race person. Herbert represents his education as being conducted, properly, through a series of mentors, and his training in each case is essentially in sacred realities. The most significant of these educators is Bobwirridirridi the traditional Elder and Law Man, but there are many others, all of whom teach him how to be. These others include Ah Loy, his Chinese stepfather; Esther a Jewish refugee and earth-mother figure; Ram Barbu an Afghan hawker and would be father-in-law; Monsignor Maryzic, a Polish missionary; Fr. Glascock, by any definition a liberal Catholic priest, and finally Jeremy Delacy, the aggressively nationalist grandfather of the child whose final well-meaning but tragically ill-judged intervention costs the child his life. This mixed race 'parentage'/mentoring committee is no accident as Herbert's vision of Australia was multicultural before the term had common

currency, and the syncretic layers of culture these more or less saintly mentors demonstrate are precisely what Herbert valued about his renovated Australia. There are many points in the novel where the golden-skinned boy Prindy is made to bear the hope of the entire nation, none more memorable perhaps than the moment he is lured into Ali Baba's golden-finch-net by the power of music, and thought to be an Indian god, 'all shiny gold of skin and touselled [sic] hair, so luminous of eye, so calm' (*PFMC* 472). This novel abounds in such idylls, moments of transformation where mundane realities (e.g. the fish served at Rivkah's *shabos*) acquire enlarged significance, usually of a sacred character, but also and simultaneously a politically inflected one.

HERBERT'S CRITIQUE OF SETTLER CULTURE

'Wonder', in Herbert's lexicon (*PFMC* 24), the sense of enchantment, is the faculty which he claimed was underdeveloped in the European settlers in Australia, and his analysis is thought-provoking. He claims that rootedness-in-place and the sense of wonder that comes with it failed to migrate from its many haunts in Europe, Africa and Asia Minor in the emotional baggage of the émigrés who settled Australia.

'Have you ever been to Germany?'

'Not yet. I hope to go.'

'Well, you must know something of its legends. . .of the nymphs of the Rhine and the giants of the Alps, and all the rest. Even as a stranger there . . . I spent a bit of time with the Army of Occupation . . . I couldn't help but feel the wonder of the place, because of its legends and history. It's the same everywhere . . . Britain, France, Egypt, Asia Minor . . . everywhere but here, where we live in a land the wonder of which, as damned and doomed Colonials, we've been unable to see. What wonder is in our lives is taken at second-hand, moth-eaten, only half-comprehended, from our origins.'

'Well, we've got no real history yet.'

'I didn't say history alone . . . but legend, tradition . . . which this land's packed with.'

'Aboriginal legend . . .'

'What's wrong with that? Are the legends of the Ancient Druids any the less satisfying to the English because based on culture long antedating the coming of the people who became the English . . . or the legends of Germany because dating from the Visigoths or someone?'

[. . .]

' . . . I don't want to feel alien in . . . my own native land. According

to the blackfellow there's magic in everything . . . every rock, tree, waterhole . . . even in the things he makes . . . his spears, dilly-bags. In fact, if you take the trouble, you yourself can find wonder in everything. We do in scientific things . . . what we see through a microscope, what takes place in chemical reaction. As geologists we'd find it in the rocks through rationalism. As zoologists in the pools, botanists in the trees. The blackfellow's reverence for things strikes me as much more intelligent than the blank disregard of the mass of our own people . . . who'd still be simple-minded enough to believe in the divinity of Christ and the sanctity of the Virgin Mary, the Holy Ghost, and all the rest of it.' (*PfMC* 24-5)

It became Herbert's ambitious project to attempt to recreate and communicate just such wonder and affect as he found in Indigenous cosmology, and in particular its mythological narratives, and bring them to a wider readership of Australians, and to argue that the knowledge they enact is essential to being at-home in country. To name it as baldly as this, though, is to simplify the project immensely. I will argue that for Herbert the eco-centric self—the self understood as essentially earthed in the matrix of country—is imbricated in a sacred set of relationships, one which oscillates between the poles of vitality and super-vitality. These terms will be explained in detail in the following.

DRAMATISING THE INDIGENOUS ECO-CENTRIC SELF

For Herbert race issues are intimately linked in his thinking with ecological principles and with what ecophilosopher Freya Mathews would call an ecocentric view of self (Mathews 118). Struggling to articulate a philosophy of land that seems more congruent with certain strands of environmentalism of our times, Herbert argues the sophistication of Indigenous eco-centrism and its potential for teaching whitefellas about the uniquely fragile and demanding qualities of the land they have settled. His argument proceeds in stages: firstly, he satirises European land-abuse; secondly, he identifies how Aboriginal mythological narratives embody very specific forms of ecological knowledge and affect; and thirdly, he attempts to dramatise that by systematically teaching his white readers how to understand the eco-centric nature of Dreamtime logic. This multi-stage process is best understood through the theoretical frame of ecophilosophy as practised by Val Plumwood and more particularly, Freya Mathews (Mathews). Plumwood and Mathews question anthropocentric philosophies which put human beings at the centre of existence, though they write two decades after Herbert and with a fuller consciousness of the responsibilities of post-colonialism, and tread more cautiously in Indigenous ecocosmology than Herbert does. Satire is the mode Herbert uses to lambast the exploitative degradation of land by

European settlers. He identifies such land-use as a pathology stemming from 'Europocentricity' (112), what Plumwood would call 'denying the agency of place' (Plumwood 158), and images it as akin to a blighted sexual relationship:

It's a wide silent land . . . a brooding land . . . and full of spirit things, even if you don't believe in them. Unless you can come to love it, you come to hate it . . . [. . .] like either loving or hating a woman. Most Australians . . . bush Australians . . . the others aren't really Australians at all, just transplanted Pommies or something equally alien . . . hate it. They live in it only because they have to. The shooting is hate . . . hate of your mate, hate of the boss, hate of the blacks . . . on the surface . . . but deep down, hate of the land, because it's for ever strange to you, and you need it, as every creature needs earth of its own, and you're left frustrated. Again, it's like a woman to you . . . like loving an unresponsive woman . . . (110).

Leaving aside the outmoded and questionable sectional bush-identity politics, Herbert's narrator, Jeremy Delacy, enacts his sensuous and rapturous apprehension of the beauty of the landscape (141) and is critical of destructive land-use practices. Plumwood, drawing on Mathews, theorises the destructive process in terms with which Herbert might concur:

The movement towards a universalising relationship to place is one of the hallmarks of western modernity. Its economic and epistemic systems are geared to denying the agency of place, bringing place within the medium of rationalist exchange as 'real estate' through the market, through science via assumptions of the neutrality of place and impersonality of knowledge, and through culture via the marginalisation of nonhuman meanings. As place loses agency along with salience, places themselves can become interchangeable, irrelevant and instrumentalisable, neutral surfaces upon which 'rational' human projects can be inscribed. (Plumwood 158)

Herbert, ever the story-teller, makes a case for deep ecological knowledge being embedded in what, to whitefellas, are incomprehensibly magic-saturated mythological narratives. His reinscription of these in forms more closely aligned with western-style narratives construct the earth as a sentient being, responsive to humans. Herbert's notion of the land as a female lover is graphically demonstrated in the image he creates of the luxuriance of the wet season: 'So Wet Season passed, leaving the land languishing in that Edenesque tranquillity and fruitfulness its creator, the Ol'Goomun-Ol'Goomun, had intended for it always' (275).

The context suggests a time for *tchinekin* (specifically sexual mischief, coded in this text as a pleasurable good) as well as for gathering cocky-apples, bush

plums, risking ticks (shell-backs) and hookworm, and drinking beer. His inclusion of the sharply observed realistic detail differentiates his writing from landscape utopianism or romanticism. It aims for the pragmatism of Aboriginal acceptance that even the hookworm also acts according to its nature, and that victims of the hunt can be sung to accept their fate (591). Wet season is represented as the time that Country, constructed always as sentient and as having agency in Herbert, basks in the well-being of the cooperation between Tchamala, the rainbow serpent, and in the top-end associated with the cyclonic wet and Ol'Goomun, the West Arnhem Land name for Kunapipi, the fertility principle.

Herbert reserves his most ferocious satire for what happens when whitefellas and stock despoil the billabongs, their traces make the pig seem a 'cleanly animal' (428-9):

They made camp that evening on the biggest billabong they had yet come to, where there were no pigs at all, but what was worse, the remains of several piles of guts that were still being pulled about by kites and crows, and stinking to clean blue heaven. Also there were no water-birds, except half a dozen or so lying as little islands of bright blown-up feathers each with its cloud of bluebottles, out amongst the lilies [. . .] That the despoilers weren't black was evident from the tracks of motor vehicles, scattered beer bottles, a couple broken, newspaper in sheets and scraps, some of the scraps lying with a couple of heaps of what looked like squirming heaps of iridescent [sic] metal, so thick were they with happy bluebottles, but were in fact what their owners would have called *coprus* – because according to the knowledgeable Queeny, airing her knowledge in response to the little-literate Prindy's puzzling over the odd lettering on other bits of the paper, they were Greeks [. . .]

They went on next morning into open forest. Everywhere now were signs of His Lordship's, the absent landlord's stock: countless hoof-torn pads criss-crossing through the cropped clumps of rusty kangaroo grass and broken spear-grass; new pads, little rivers of dust, old ones, scoured out by Wet Season rains, miniature gullies exposing the conglomerate beneath the skin of grey talc. No more knee-deep Flinder's grass growing on the little flats that wound between the hummocks of raised ground as when only the kangaroo as herbivore roamed the land. The little flats were bare white patches. Every shady spot was now a dung heap.

The calling of the cattle was now the music of the land [. . .]

What had been done to the country . . . by pigs and cattle was nothing compared with what the gold miners of forty or fifty years before had done [. . .] It was hereabouts that Civilization of the land had begun in

force where the process known as Opening Up The Country had really begun. Quite literally had this country been Opened up. *Disembowelled* would be an apter term. (428-30, my emphasis)

The genealogy of mismanagement runs in a degenerative line from an absent Lord Vaisey (modelled on the British absentee cattle king Vestey), through two lower orders, the Old Australians (descendants of pioneers like the Duracks and Costellos), and the New Australians (who sport monikers like Dago, Hun, Wop, Balt, Pom) (428).

One of the most striking aspects of Herbert's representation of Aboriginal cosmology is the collaborative dialogue in which human-beings and nature engage. After the death of King George and Queeny, respectively his traditional uncle and aunt, Prindy has to negotiate huge tracts of country, normally considered unnavigable wilderness by whitefellas, in order to return to his own country, Lily Lagoons. He is represented as an unusual traditional man in being 'solitary' rather than communal in his habits (464), but he is far from being alone. His matrix constitutes a 'plenum metaphysic' (Mathews 142): creatures and country dialogue with him; a lone dingo and a plenitude of birds drawn to him by his musical abilities, direct him, feed him, cheer him. The discourse can be read as neo-romantic and utopian, but is more powerfully read through the lens of *plenism* (Mathews 142)—the dynamic process (which owes more to Einsteinian cosmology than to Newtonian atomism) whereby the self/other distinction collapses in an unfolding process in which the individual perceives himself to be, and becomes, part of a wider biodiverse field:

At last he was free to follow his *Rown Road*. That could be in no direction but his own choosing, or rather the choice of the forces primarily dominating such a life as his—those of Nature. The seasonal wind was from the south-east, bringing the sounds and scents on which as a creature of the wilderness now his well-being would depend, as well as advantage over other creatures to windward of him. The Ol'Goomun-Ol'Goomun made her first beckoning appearance in the south-east. Even Igulgul, by the angle of his sinking, would be making his rising for this season South of East. The very birds seemed to be heading that way.

Indeed the heading of the birds his way may have been more in the way of collaboration than coincidence, the way they came to take a look at him, in flocks, in pairs, in families, or alone, according to their natures, surely struck by the sight of the small long figure whose hairless skin glowed in the sunlight and wind-blown topknot glinted, and who could speak their language, joining them in the carolling, twittering, chattering, cawing, whistling, croaking to each other about

him. Where was he going? How could he find succour in that blasted land? Someone must show him. The parrots showed him the kapok trees he would otherwise have had to hunt for. The crested bell-birds showed him where the grasshoppers were lurking, ringing their tiny bells of voices. Crested wedgebills, delighting in his mimicry of their sweet song, and especially when they tried to trick him with a bit of ventriloquism and found he could do the same, showed him pods opening to shed seeds that made good nutty munching. Red quandong cherries were the spotted bower-birds' offering . . . He got even when a prindi came scuttling along to take a look, nodded when given the sign that they were Mates, and led him to a clump of bushes where the babblers had a community of nests, and while those sitting the eggs chased him away, gave his young two-legged mate the chance to do a nice bit of thieving. Night parrots led him to water in the gekko-holes while he was still in the rocky wastes of the devastated land of the Frog Men . . . Once when he hadn't been doing so well through the generosity of his new-found friends because of a bit of unbountiful country, he was about to commit the unforgivable by sneaking with his boomerang on a bower-bird he heard going through its repertoire in its bower, to be saved getting the reputation of Wanjin the Dingo by a black-breasted buzzard, who circling above, gave the warning, then called the would-be treacherous one away to show him a much more honest and satisfying meal in the shape of a clutch of emu's eggs in a patch of trampled grass with no one in attendance. There were a baker's dozen of them.

[. . .]

Now dingoes like to attach themselves to solitary humans, and apparently without ulterior motive, since it has never been recorded that one has broken such a truce. It is always in the nature of a truce, because the dog's approach is very wary; and no doubt about it, he can read people's minds . . . They shared the bustards and wallabies that one or the other brought down, this being better country. They shared their watering, which White Wanjin found. They camped together. At night Prindy would see the red eyes glowing like coals, reflecting the light of his fire. He would talk to him sing to him. Wanjin [the albino dingo] never answered. Perhaps he expected Prindy to read his mind, too. Legend had it that the original Wanjin learnt to read others' minds from the Ol'Goomun, whose dog he was, of course. (*PfMC* 465-6)

The discourses in action here point to human and non-human selves that are at the same time autonomous (self-maintaining, potentially at the expense of other creatures) but also interconnected, dependent on other selves, whether bird or gekko or dingo. Herbert dramatises one of the major tenets of Deep Ecology (which of course long postdated his writing, and which Mathews draws on, and critiques), 'biocentric egalitarianism':

The intuition of biocentric equality is that all things in the biosphere have an equal right to live and blossom and to reach their own individual forms of unfolding and self-realization within the larger Self-realization. This basic intuition is that all organisms and entities in the ecosphere, as parts of the interrelated whole, are equal in intrinsic worth. (Devall and Sessions 67)

Herbert's representation of Indigenous cosmology/physics/metaphysics enacts a sense of land itself and the living selves (human and non-human) as a web of interconnections which valorises the diversity of life-forms. The extensive lists of creatures and their bounty, much truncated in my quotation, is testimony to this, as is the rapture with which they are enumerated, so singular in a novel that is largely a jeremiad or a satire. It is precisely the ethical stance of creature willingly giving itself up to other creatures, intent on exchange, or freely giving information about its environment (like the parrots or the dingo) simply by acting according to its nature, that generates the biodiversity. Biodiversity is represented as an inalienable good in this 'wasteland' that lies outside the colonial economy. It is a gift born of the interconnectedness of Ol'Goomun-Ol'Goomun and Tchamala (the Rainbow Serpent), which makes so offensive and morally urgent to Herbert the destruction described above by pigs (1121) and cattle and miners of the delicate Top End soils and lagoons that are critical to the sustenance of biodiversity (human and non-human). For Herbert, the matter is simultaneously scientific and sacred—the environmental abuse is both indefensible in terms of sustainability, but also an affront to the sense of wonder in the earth's plenitude itself. Contemporary ecological science argues a similar case: Bird cites the ecologist E. O. Wilson as noting that 'the more species that inhabit an ecosystem . . . the more productive and stable is the ecosystem' (Rose, 'Indigenous Philosophical Ecology' 301). Pigs and cattle constitute for Herbert monocultures, analogous to the destructive ethnocentrism and cultural superiority of the settlers.

THE VITAL, THE SUPERVITAL AND THE SACRED

Further, the phenomenon that Tamisari and Bradley call the interdependence of the vital and the supervital, whereby the literal object is substance, and self, and also sacred self depending on its representational mode, underpins the whole novel. It is also specifically enacted in the passage cited above, especially in the wary relationship between the dingo and the boy. The dingo, along with the birds, is both vital (a physical dog, acting according to its nature) but also supervital (a dreaming creature) because of its prior kinship relationship to Ol'Goomun. The novel is saturated with the doings of two dynamic spirit beings, Ol'Goomun (the Kunapipi fertility principle) and Tchamala

(the Rainbow Serpent whose activities are cyclical and monsoonal), and Herbert works hard to ensure they are larger-than-life narrative subjects and fellow agents of Prindy, though they do not appear in the extensive *dramatis personae*. The uses to which he puts what in European tradition is thought of as mythological material is beyond the scope of this paper.

Herbert's counter-hegemonic sense of earthed, topography-specific meta-physical principles contests nature/culture and physical/sacred binarisms. It also helps to explain his sense of how western culture, so unshackled from the sense of place, inappropriately displaces ecological consciousness with its own oppressive scientism, though Herbert continually underscores the uses of scientific paradigms in land and animal and human management and well-being. What Prindy's encounter with the 'wilderness' (here problematised because nature is culture in Indigenous understandings) demonstrates is a self-realising individual in no way separable or discretely related to the sentient ecosystem in which he finds himself and which itself constitutes a plenum of non-human selves (the moon, the winds, the birds, the dingo, the minute gekko rockholes, the quandong cherries, the eggs, and so on, all of which have a place in Indigenous kinship systems). This passage challenges the notion that selves could be constructed separable from this plenum. Prindy's personal ego is 'grounded in a recognition of the metaphysical fact of connectedness' (Mathews 148) and expands as he moves into wider and wider dimensions of the ecocosm. This is more than the journey of the hero of romance for some external prize, but a growth in understanding specifically of his ecocosmology, of the continuity of nature and human as categories, of interspecies ethics, and one that is insistently both sacralised and politicised by Herbert. Deborah Bird Rose, whose writing about Aboriginal cosmology postdates Herbert's writing by over a decade, explains the localised and interdependent nature of Aboriginal understandings of region in terms that are congruent with and amplify Herbert's research:

The living world can be divided up into portions or countries, each of which is a unit or living system. Each country is independent; this means that it is its own boss. But no country is self-sufficient. Each one is surrounded by other countries, so that across the continent and on into the sea, there is a network of countries. No country is ruled by any other, and no country can live without others. It follows that no country is the centre toward which other countries must orient themselves, and, equally, that each is its own centre. (Rose, *Nourishing Terrains* 38)

The notion of land as having agency, being its own 'boss', being capable of relationship, expanding from the point where a human being finds him or herself, is critical to both Herbert and Rose. What Herbert points to in his

representation of Prindy's journey is the principle that the 'Country tells you', a proposition which in Rose's terms 'prioritises country's communication, and positions human responsibility as knowledgeable action in response to country' and to those 'messages' emanating from creatures and things acting according to their natures (Rose, 'Indigenous Philosophical Ecology' 300). Human knowledge directs action in response to other-than-human communication by way of sounds, smells, actions, brightness, beauty: 'Within the communicative matrix of country, people respond to the patterns of connection and benefit, nurturing their own lives and the lives of others' (Rose 300). Prindy survives his extraordinary journey because he is alive to the connectivities, the synergies of mutual benefit that entangle species and enrich them, and because, rather than imposing his agency and subjectivity onto his environment, he is called into action by the other-than-human world, taught by it, nourished by it. There is a serious playfulness in Herbert's dramatisation of the other-than-human hawk teaching the Law, and educating Prindy in the ethics of preferring unguarded emu eggs to disrupting the bowerbird (cited above 465).

Without romanticising either Indigenous or European races (see 117), Herbert argues the need for two kinds of exchange: sexual equality on the one hand, and knowledge-exchange that is based on the possibility of a dialogue with the 'more-than-human world' (Plumwood). One metaphor he proffers, which is simplicity itself but gains salience from ecocentric philosophy, is that of the black and white ibis who act according to their individual 'selves', but are 'equally proud of their breed' (*PFMC* 215). To lack a sense of the agency of selves, whether of land itself or human selves of whatever colour, is in Herbert's economy, to squander the common wealth.

In conclusion, then, for its time, *PFMC* was unusual in its inclusiveness, especially of mixed-descent persons, in insisting that Indigenous perspectives and culture had to be embraced if Europeans were to even begin to understand the specificities of the new physical conditions, and especially its economy of ecological mutual benefit. It is unique, I suggest, in apprehending the links between science, culture and the sacred, and celebrating it.

NOTES

- ¹ I am indebted to Peter Simon, a journalist who met and wrote several articles about Xavier and Sadie, for information about Herbert's links with Indigenous and other informants (personal communication, 30 Jan 06).

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