Introduction

Most history, when it has been digested by people, becomes myth. Myth is an arrangement of the past, whether real or imagined, in patterns that resonate with a culture’s deepest values and aspirations. Myths create and reinforce archetypes so taken for granted, so seemingly axiomatic, that they go unchallenged. Myths are so fraught with meaning that we live and die by them. They are the maps by which cultures navigate through time.¹

modern aesthetics is an aesthetic of the sublime, though a nostalgic one. It allows the unrepresentable to be put forward only as the missing contents; but the form, because of its recognizable consistency, continues to offer to the reader or viewer matter for solace and pleasure.²

This book examines the nature and dimensions of the white-vanishing trope – recurrent stories about white Australians who become lost or disappear into the landscape – as an enduring and powerful myth in white Australian settler culture. By identifying white vanishing’s mythic and discursive dimensions, by naming and illustrating its recurring ideological features, and by looking in depth at white vanishing broadly, across all its types or sub-genres, this book offers an overarching way of reading white vanishing as a trope – that is, as an interconnected tissue of stories that sorts history into culture by embedding, narrativizing, and naturalizing politicized values, categories, and relationships. Only then can we begin to understand how an apparently-innocent storyline, such as being lost in the bush, can also have powerful political dimensions that hold us locked in the categories of our colonial past.

¹ Ronald Wright, Stolen Continents: The ‘New World’ Through Indian Eyes Since 1492 (Toronto: Viking, 1991).
We have been aware of the large numbers of stories about disappearance in Australia for some time now. In 1980, Susan Dermody identified a cluster of what she called “lost in the bush” films, starting with Peter Dodds’ 1973 *Lost in the Bush* (about the lost ‘Duff’ children), and including Nicolas Roeg’s *Walkabout*, Peter Weir’s *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and *The Last Wave*, and Tim Burstall’s *Eliza Fraser*.3 These films and others like them, Dermody argued, displace the characters into the bush, the difficult terrain of the uncivilized wilderness, with episodic crises in the struggle to survive. Each small success tends to prove some attribute of civilization, against the orderless, indifferent wilderness. And the quest is for home, parents, the ordered relations of [white] society.4

Also in 1980, Alan Lawson had noted similar themes in settler Australian literature, suggesting that there was a trope of “incorporation,” including

several complexly related versions in which the settler is consumed by the land: there is the lost child, the captivity narrative, shipwrecked sailor or vanished explorer, each of whom may be captive, foundling, or merely vanished.5

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