Black Displacements

The Semiosis of Indigeneity in the White-Vanishing Trope

Primitives are like children, the tropes say. Primitives are our untamed selves, our id forces – libidinous, irrational, violent, dangerous. Primitives are mystics, in tune with nature, part of its harmonies. Primitives are free.¹

Hyper-separation means defining the dominant identity emphatically against, or in opposition to, the subordinated identity, by exclusion of their real or supposed qualities. The function of hyper-separation is to mark out the Other for separate and inferior treatment. […]. Colonizers exaggerate differences – for example, through emphasizing exaggerated cleanliness, ‘civilized’ or ‘refined’ manners, body covering, or alleged physiological differences between what are defined as separate races.²

This chapter explores the first of the four key semiotic commodities that structure white-vanishing texts: black displacements. This term refers to the trope’s multiple displacements of Indigenous presence. White-vanishing texts are inflected with displacements both in form (where Indigenous presence is absent from narratives that focus exclusively on white activity) and in varying degrees of content, from displacement of the Indigenous by the white-constructed indigene to active articulation of a van-

ishing race or ‘fatal impact’ doctrine. The category is on one level dialectical: black displacements encompasses both fatal-impact doctrine and a nostalgic impulse that memorializes and celebrates certain imagined positive aspects of a primitivized Indigenous culture and subjectivity by constructing ‘the indigene’ as a one-dimensional sign. On another level, this dialectic of exclusion and incorporation is always one-way, as the white text claims for itself a position of authority in constructing and controlling the indigene. This chapter explores both the range of representations of Indigeneity in white-vanishing texts and the particular recurring figure of the so-called ‘black tracker’, to show the consistency of displacing textual manoeuvres across more than two centuries of the white-vanishing trope.

There are four principal forms of textual imagery that constitute black displacements in white-vanishing texts: complete absence (no indigenes in the text at all); marginal ‘colour’ (one-dimensional indigenes on the fringes of texts who provide background alterity); focal fetish (more central, but also instrumental, indigenes who exhibit recognizable stereotyped racial characteristics such as orality or mysticism); and indigenized whites (proximal figures who approach and stand in for indigeneity by taking on some of its projected negative and positive characteristics, but who ultimately remain white). Indigenous within white-vanishing texts are always confined within this limited range of representations. Most often they are not present at all, and when present they are stereotyped as “hostile force to be subdued […] helpers of the colonial project or […] child-like people to be patronized and protected.”

These characteristics are particularly evident in the figure of the ‘black tracker’, an indigene, common in white-vanishing texts, who possesses an innate knowledge of landscape that is denied to whites. White Australia has a history of both material and symbolic attempts at black displacement. Indigenous presence and land ownership make irrecon-

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