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Entering *terra nullius*

The White-Vanishing Trope and the Contest for Australian Space

the Beaumonts are not the only ones who explored a little way off the cultural map and disappeared into thin air: Harold Holt, Ludwig Leichhardt, Azaria Chamberlain, the girls from Miss Appleby’s school... All inhabiting now this Other space in Australian memory.¹

if you really want to point up a landscape that is deserted, then you put somebody within it.²

**This chapter focuses on the spatial politics** of the white-vanishing trope, cataloguing the ways in which the texts work constantly and simultaneously to domesticate and yet emphasize the strangeness of the spaces they construct. The texts usually depict two dichotomous spaces, representing two incompatible ‘worlds’, and their key action sequences take place on the borders between these worlds. The spaces of these texts where whites vanish are depicted as regions where meetings of one world with another might occur, even going as far as merging; these are dangerous zones where social and cultural rules, mores and expectations are abandoned or weakened, with alarming consequences. Those whites who vanish enter a space marked as Other – as *terra nullius*. Again, the counter-instance or “undesirable condition subserve[s] the needs of the desirable

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one,“
 with the texts using anxiety about pockets of transgressive or unreliable
spatiality in Australia as the springboard to assert and endorse a distinctly
colonial (and colonizing) politics of regulated, bounded, predictable space.

In Postmodern Geographies, Edward Soja reminds us of the political
nature of spatial arrangements:

We must be insistently aware of how space can be made to hide conse-
quences from us, how relations of power and discipline are inscribed into the
apparently innocent spatiality of social life, how human geographies become
filled with politics and ideology.4

Particularly in Australia, land and nature are “disputed territories of the mind,
as well as a material resource subject to pragmatic negotiations.”5 In fact, David Carter suggests, “the land […] has been the most politicised of all our
national images and is likely to remain disputed symbolic territory.”6 Unpack-
ing the spatial arrangements of the white-vanishing texts reveals evidence
both of these kinds of disputes, and of the inscription of power, politics, and
ideology in a spatiality of difference and separation that is presented as self-
evident. As Joanne Tompkins points out,

alterity is firmly bound up in spatiality to the extent that an exploration of the
nature of spatiality provides a means of understanding a nation’s preoccu-
pations with, and repression of, otherness.7

The spatial representations in white-vanishing texts, like the texts’ constructs
of time, are characterized by hyperseparations that oppose reason to the irra-
tional, culture to nature, and human to non-human. In these texts, spatial
structures and the values attached to configurations of land, landscape, dis-
tance, position, proximity, background, foreground, spatial purpose, and place
perform division and disparity as their dominant ideological modes. The
white-vanishing trope’s spatial politics, like its politics of bodies and time, is
largely a reflection and performance of white colonialism’s meta-narratives of
exclusion and difference.

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3 White, Tropics of Discourse, 151.
7 Tompkins, Unsettling Space, 20.