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White Vanishing *in situ*

The Semiosis of Replacement
in Five Australian White-Vanishing Texts

Ideas and habits of minds live on long after their intellectual supports have been removed.¹

We should be alert to the replication of old structures in new contexts.²

The previous chapters each explored an aspect of the semiosis of white vanishing: when extracted from their individual narratives and viewed collectively, these four semiotic commodities participated in, reflected, and reinforced wider white Australian mythmaking around issues arising from colonial history, and thereby linked their host texts together in terms of a broad ideological function. As well as this feature-by-feature approach to the ideology of white vanishing, it is useful to look at how the four dominant semiotic commodities function *in situ*: that is, how ‘black displacements’, ‘white presencing’, ‘temporal trouble’, and ‘entering terra nullius’ combine and interact within particular narratives. While the separate examination of each commodity has indicated a core pattern in white vanishing that transcends textual boundaries, holistic textual analyses yield an important complementary picture, fleshing out the transcendent structure with more specific demonstrations of the semiotic dimensions of white-vanishing discourse combining in context. This chapter therefore examines the ways in which white vanishing’s four key semiotic commodities are revealed in five specific texts: Charles Harpur’s poem “The Creek of the Four Graves” (1845), Carmel Bird’s *The Bluebird Café* (1990), David Malouf’s *Remember-

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¹ Reynolds, “Racism and Other National Discourses,” 32.
² Rose, “Dark Times and Excluded Bodies in the Colonisation of Australia,” 106.

The analysis of these five texts demonstrates that they share a distinctive pattern of semiotic commodities, albeit combining and emphasizing them in different ways. Within each, the key semiotic elements of white vanishing function together, in various but similar ways, to formulate a dimension that is familiar, even predictable, in its appeal to and reinforcement of colonial discursive patterns. Looking in turn at each work’s overall semiosis shows the ways in which, although I separated the commodities for ease of discussion throughout this book, they are in some ways inextricable, each functioning as an aspect of the others. Not every white-vanishing text has every semiotic commodity, but each is recognizable in its own way as combining at least three of the key features of white vanishing, and the political effects of those combinations are always comparable with other examples of the trope.

All the texts deploy hyperseparations and facilitate a white indigenization that displaces actual Indigenous claims to the land. Each is quite distinctly a narrative of anti-conquest that depicts white (usually male) exploits, mythologizes white (usually male) failures, and tells a white story about white struggle to survive and a quest for belonging. Each of the texts examined here uses white vanishing to write a narrative of white Australian occupation that in a general sense changes very little from 1845 to 2004. The five works are presented in chronological order, in order to demonstrate by diachronic consistency that the ideological nature of white vanishing transcends not only genre but also period. The extent to which these patterns continue chronologically over a span of 160 years indicates that, as Gramsci argues, hegemony requires constant cultural work to be sustained.\(^3\)

Charles Harpur: “The Creek of Four Graves”

Mary Harpur wrote, in the preface to the first collection of her husband Charles’s collected works, published posthumously in 1883, that his “ambition was to become a poet worthy of the land he loved, to be ‘the bard of his