

Locating Voss Within Change, Conflict and Convergence

By:

Carol leon

(Paper presented at the *Conference on Conflict, Change and Convergence*, held on 2-5 December 2008 in Kandy, Sri Lanka)

Perpustakaan Universiti Malaya



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In his book *Voss* there is certainly a determined attempt by Patrick White to comprehend past narratives of the Australian continent and its dwellers so as to grasp some truths about them and reconstitute a new world.

Voss, a highly-textured narrative, is a twentieth-century text that depicts a nineteenth-century situation. To contextualise the narrative within the Australian literary scene of the 1800s illuminates some of the themes that run through the novel. In "Literature, History and Literary History: Perspectives on the Nineteenth Century in Australia", Brian Kiernan surveys writings that comment on nineteenth-century Australian literature; these invariably touch on issues of nationalism, patriotism and self-definition that were an integral part of Australian history then, as they are now. Starting with G.B. Barton's *Literature in New South Wales* (1866) and *The Poets and Prose Writers of New South Wales* (1866) – both pioneering works on Australian literature – Kiernan proceeds to highlight the discrepancy between literary and social histories of Australia. This period marked early stages of national consciousness in Australia when the settlements were in the throes of wanting to establish a national literature. At the same time, Australia was an infant colony still working out its relationship with the Mother Country. Though England's impact on Australian literature was dominant and unavoidable, this "cultural transmission" was a "continuing, and changing, process" (Kiernan 1997: 30). Underlying the transferral of culture was the need

for a literature that would reflect a growing, future nation. Robert Dixon writes in *The Course of Empire* from the 1815 onwards there was the need of an increasingly conventional epic form. The emphasis on the epic form was tied in with the desire to portray Australia as a civilised society because historically the epic genre has been a model for asserting nationhood and patriotism.¹ The Romantic literary tradition in Europe had a patriotic appeal and there were corresponding manifestations of the Romantic tradition in Australia in the 1800s as the country moved towards nationalism.

Kiernan's and Dixon's various observations highlight certain paths taken by Australian literary history that throw light on the historical context in which *Voss* is situated and which White wanted to foreground. *Voss* displays an engagement with the Romantic literary tradition to explore a nineteenth-century Australian context. The text seems to possess Romantic features predominant in early nineteenth-century literature – the focus on national consciousness, the individual genius as exemplified in the protagonist Voss, the concern for selfhood and identity. The book lends itself easily to the pioneering theme of nineteenth-century Australia. However, though he describes his novels as “quite old-fashioned and traditional – almost Nineteenth Century”, ultimately everything he wrote, White asserts, is “dredged up from the unconscious” (White, P. 1973: 139) so that his writings seem to aspire towards the unfamiliar, a style of writing which

¹ See Kiernan, *Studies in Australian Literary History* (Sydney: Sydney Studies Shoestring P, 1997) 29-71.

Kiernan describes as different, “discomfortingly modern” (1997: 66). Of course, White is regarded as a “modernist” writer. In “The Politics of Modernism”, Michael Wilding describes him as “the great Australian modernist.” The character Voss, then, is not a heroic, Romantic figure but “a monomaniac”, “like almost all human beings flawed and fallible” (White, P. 1973: 138).

Thus *Voss* mediates between Romantic and Modernist positions. My analysis of the text, however, extends this interpretative framework to suggest that it possesses postcolonial and postmodern impulses. Critics are already situating discussions on White’s writings within current critical discourse, suggesting that White’s fiction begs comparison with works by Salman Rushdie, Peter Carey, Wilson Harris, and Janet Frame.

Leichhardt Revisited

In a letter a year before the publication of *Voss*, White writes that he had for some years nursed the idea of a book about a megalomaniac explorer and, after doing some research, felt that the German traveller, Ludwig Leichhardt, might prove to be a suitable figure on whom to model his fictitious character. White’s letter is very telling because he touches on the fact that the title character of the text is “only *based*” on Leichhardt and that he did not want to “limit [himself] to a historical reconstruction” (White, P. 1994: 107). Here White addresses the vital interplay of fact and fiction that underlies *Voss*.

The problematisation of what is considered factual information and the possibilities for profound truths in fiction are major concerns in postcolonial and postmodern perceptions that deal with Other voices, histories and "truths". Both postcolonial and postmodern approaches question the validity and authenticity of historical narratives. Much attention has been given to the discursive form of history and events. Colonial history, is also, to a large extent, a textual exercise. But by that same token, the textuality of history can also be a means by which to recuperate identity and assert agency. White's novel foregrounds this potential.

Voss is a substantial book set in 1840s colonial Sydney with its growing capitalist middle-class society. The text is peopled by a wide array of characters playing stereotypical roles ranging from the rich trader settler to the explorer, landowner and bushman. The narrative's gesture towards a realistic mode seems to secure *Voss* within the tradition of the Western pioneering narrative. However, because *Voss* is an historical novel, it pushes to the surface the problem of fiction's relation to "reality", specifically history. The French philosopher, Paul Ricoeur, has written extensively about the fictionality of historical representation. In *History and Truth*, he emphasises the dual aspects of objectivity and subjectivity of history. He explains that though history is constantly being "born and reborn", this, he asserts, confirms its objectivity because the narrative "always flows from the way in which traditional societies rectify the official and pragmatic arrangement of their past" (22). While the historian is ultimately "the measure of the objectivity proper to history", the historian's task is not to restore the past but

to create a document and in this way “establish” historical facts. The aim of history is not to recoup the past but “to recompose and reconstruct, that is to say, to compose and construct a retrospective sequence” (23-4), as history is one of the ways by which “men ‘repeat’ their belonging to the same humanity” (29). Hence “objectivity is just that: a work of methodical activity” (23). Invariably, Ricoeur addresses the issue of fact and fiction and states that we have to move away from traditional assumptions that narrative is distinct from life and so relegated to the domain of fiction. His thesis – to a degree borrowed from Gadamer – is that the process of composition is not wholly contained within the text and the reader completes the process. The “*world of the text*” necessarily intersects with the “*world of the reader*” (Ricoeur 1991: 26). The text is not closed in upon itself as it draws the reader into its world (Ricoeur 1991: 26), making possible the “reconfiguration of life by narrative” (Ricoeur 1991: 26). The narrative, then, is imaged as a fluid, dynamic medium.

Expanding on Ricoeur’s views, Hayden White who defines Ricoeur’s *Time and Narrative* (1983) as “the most important synthesis of literary and historical theory of our century” (141), insists on the narrativity in history writes and states that historical discourse resembles literary fictions like epics, novels and short stories, speaking in symbolic rhetoric “rather than in that of logical and technical discourse” (147). Both Ricoeur’s and Hayden White’s views shed some light on what Patrick White strives to do in *Voss*. White saw fiction as an essential dimension in the interrogation of fact and indeed believed that fiction gave the

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writer added scope to explore the mysteries of human existence. He asserts the importance of wedding life and imagination in literature and the luminous effect resulting from this “admittedly disturbing marriage” (White, P. 1989: 83). Citing *Voss* as example, White states that by not writing about Leichhardt and using a fictitious protagonist instead, he had greater freedom to probe the psychological complexities of human character (White, P. 1989: 84).

At this stage, I would like to briefly discuss Friedrich Wilhelm Ludwig Leichhardt (1813-?1848), the German explorer on whom the figure of Voss is modelled. And also “possibly the single most controversial figure in the history of Australian exploration”. Leichhardt, a legendary traveller in Australia, led several expeditions into the continent. The explorer mysteriously disappeared when attempting for the second time to cross the Australian desert in the East-West expedition of 1848. Leichhardt’s explorations added substantially to the white settlers’ knowledge of Australian geography, natural history and geology but he himself was an eccentric man who elicited as much praise for his courage and imagination as condemnation for his travel methods and treatment of fellow travellers. Varied myths have grown around the explorer’s name. Books that have been written on this enigmatic traveller have created such diverse portraits that Glen McLaren, when analysing two assessments on Leichhardt, is prompted to comment that they “could almost have been written about two different men” (179)! Voss has the same ambiguous aura about him, eliciting extreme responses from those he meets.

Differing portrayals of Leichhardt underscore Ricoeur's and Hayden White's analysis of historical texts as narratives that change constantly. White's *Voss* is yet another narrative about Leichhardt. More important to my purpose, it is a historical novel that insists on its fictionality. In many ways, the text is a deliberate reaction to traditional paradigms that project history as a factual record of events. Before I proceed, it would be best to define the extent to which *Voss* is read as a postmodern text in this discussion. Though the novel questions notions of historical representation and "truth", it does not take an extreme stance towards historiography as say Jean Baudrillard's *The Illusion of the End* which argues that history never existed. In *Voss*, there is the pervasive sense that history (in this context colonial history) is not merely a rhetorical, aesthetic creation of the historian but rather, to borrow from French historian Fernand Dumont, "a living memory" (qtd. in Gagnon 7), in constant dialogue with the present moment. White's narrative stresses the profound effect of history on a person/community and the way it offers possibilities for empowerment. In this, the text reveals its rootedness in postcolonial concerns.

Voss is a vivid example of such reworking of history. It is no wonder, then, that the exploration motif is vital in *Voss* because early accounts of exploration about Australia helped determine the historic roots of white identity. Explorers were celebrated as originary figures in Australian history. They legitimised the occupation and appropriation of the spaces of the continent. Hence the exploratory

narrative is complicit with the colonial agenda. White, however, uses the exploration motif to examine notions of place/space and investigate the settler society's image and understanding of itself. By adopting as his main protagonist an explorer whose disappearance remains "one of the great mysteries of Australian history" (Bassett xi), White seems to undermine the role of the iconic explorer in the historical chronicles of white Australia. The mystery surrounding Leichhardt opens possibilities for different interpretations of Leichhardt's final expedition, enabling White to offer a narrative that could respond to the mystery. Yet what happens ultimately is that *Voss* moves away from the grand narrative of the exploration tradition.

Desert Places/Spaces

Here I need to draw on Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's philosophy of "becoming" and difference. Indeed some of the notions defined and explored in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980) illuminate *Voss* in surprising ways. A vital way of approaching *Voss* is through its desert motif which is also a predominant trope in *A Thousand Plateaus*.

Deleuze and Guattari advocate what could be called a line of "nomad" thought in their critiques of Western philosophy. This line of thinking celebrates diversity, resisting any attempt at or condition of incarceration, immobility and teleology. "Nomad" thought renounces history written from a "sedentary" or fixed point of view and promotes what Deleuze and Guattari call "nomadology" which is "the opposite of a history" (23). While conventional history is linear and has one site

of enunciation, nomadology has “a collective assemblage of enunciation” (23) where points are subordinate to trajectory. Though the nomad pays heed to points (for instance dwelling, water and assembly points), the trajectory is all-important. Paths determine points: “The water point is reached only in order to be left behind” (380). While a path is always between two points, “it enjoys both an autonomy and a direction of its own” (380). The desert is a nomad space “that gnaws, and tends to grow, in all directions” (382). Hence the relationship between nomad and desert is one of mutual deterritorialization as it can only be imaged in terms of multiplicity and continuous movement.

Within this context of “nomad” thought and space lies the concept of becoming which is not a process of assimilation but a mode of change and transformation. Deleuze and Guattari define the line of becoming as a line of resistance as it defies points that fix and determine: “A line of becoming is not defined by points that it connects, or by points that compose it; on the contrary, it passes *between* points. . . . A point is *always* a point of origin. But a line of becoming has neither beginning nor end, departure nor arrival, origin nor destination. . . . A line of becoming has only a *middle*” (293). On many levels, *Voss* explores these ideas of “nomad” thought. Though the travel lines initially follow a “sedentary” mode of movement, as the journey progresses, the travel lines become lines of becoming and, ultimately, lines of belonging.

The desert in *Voss* becomes a site for exploring notions of place/space and self. The backdrop for most of the events in the novel is the desert landscape of Australia. The desert motif is pervasive in *Voss* and it engages with both material and metaphysical dimensions. In White's narrative, the desert landscape becomes a fluid place/space from which to explore early encounters between the white settler society and the Aboriginal community. Within this landscape, White undermines conventional readings of white-black relations.

Before I proceed to analyse *Voss*, I must return to Deleuze and Guattari and briefly detail their philosophical discussions of space, stemming from their concept of nomadology, which are particularly relevant to my study of place/space in White's novel. Two kinds of space are differentiated in *A Thousand Plateaus*: "smooth" space and "striated" space. Smooth space is not homogeneous and is amorphous. Also termed "nomad" space, smooth space is "filled by events or haecceities, far more than by formed and perceived things" (479). Striated space, which is synonymous with "sedentary" space, is fixed and prone to organising matter. Because it is governed by optical perception, measures and properties define it. In striated space, lines or trajectories are subordinated to points which means that one moves from one fixed point to another. In smooth space, points are subordinated to the trajectory. Nomadic travellers are located within a smooth space because for them, dwelling (a point) is secondary to the journey. Smooth space then is "directional rather than dimensional or metric" (479). Since the nomadic journey is determined by the location of vegetation and

water, directions of the journey, necessarily, keep changing. This constitutes a fluid line of travel. In short, while order prevails in the striated space, there is continuous variation and development of form in the smooth space (478). However, the two spaces can exist only "in mixture: smooth space is constantly being translated, transversed into a striated space; striated space is constantly being reversed, returned to a smooth space" (474).

There are two kinds of space in *Voss*. One is the cultivated space signaling imperial presence. Generally, this is located along the fringes of the continent. It includes the dwelling-sites of the white settler community, people like the Bonners and the Pringles, who have tried to tame the country and create order in a new environment. Such people occupy what could be called a "striated" space, ordered by the teleological trajectory of colonising history. Here the subject reterritorialises place/space by drawing rigid boundaries around a location. The novel opens in Sydney and the dwellers in this space are entrenched in the Victorian dilemma of faith and doubt. An obsession for manners and niceties coupled with a prodigious concern for status and class are reflected in the different characters that people the novel. It is a concrete, well-grounded backdrop against which to enact the search for self and God, a quest that underpins the narrative. The other space in the narrative is the interior of the continent, the unexplored and consequently unknown desert. The desert space is dreamlike and nebulous and in resisting order and measurement, may be defined as "smooth" space. For the fringe dwellers, the desert is an undifferentiated mass, important only because it

helps frame the city. This is especially apparent from the conversation that Voss has with Pringle at a picnic when the latter expresses his belief that the expedition will yield no interesting insights about the hinterland of the continent:

It seems to me . . . that this country will prove most hostile to anything in the nature of planned development. It has been shown that deserts prefer to resist history and develop along their own lines. . . . But I am inclined to believe, Mr. Voss, that you will discover a few black-fellers, and a few flies, and something resembling the bottom of the sea. (62)

Pringle and the other settlers view the interior as an empty, inverted space. But *Voss* is “a meditation on the meaning of the desert” (Green 284) and it destabilises centres and insists on multiplicity and difference. There is a frequent coalescence of “striated” and “smooth” spaces in *Voss*, demanded by the external and inner travel which constitutes the journey motif in the narrative.

Becoming-journey

When Voss starts on his expedition, it is clearly a colonial enterprise. The journey, sponsored by rich patrons, is headed by an arrogant explorer who declares that he will “make” the map (23) of the unknown terrain he wants to explore. This urge towards appropriation and acquisition explains the importance of instruments of measurement in this expedition. The expedition is implicated with property owning and power. In early discussions about the journey, Voss and Bonner, one of the patrons, construct Australia as a semiotic blank – its places and spaces open to projection and inscription. *Voss*. When Voss embarks on this expedition, it is with the sense, both in him and the settlers, that Australian history is white history and that the interior of the

continent, also home to the Aborigines, is an unwritten space, waiting to be discovered.

The point of departure in Voss' journey is important as it throws light on the rest of the trip. Indeed the "initiating concept of the expedition" in the early part of the text informs and shapes the material of the novel (Walsh 1976: 16). This point of departure is infused with subtleties. For the people of Sydney who throng to the quayside to send off the explorers, this is an exciting event, a "historic adventure" (109). In capturing the excitement and bustle of an important exploration journey, the description of the departure scene evokes a strong colonial impulse. There is the presence of the government official, his speech appealing to loyalty to Queen and country add to this atmosphere of imperial travel. Mr. Bonner, who is the chief patron of the expedition, takes on a pompous, leading role in the activities. He and most of the other white settlers are initially portrayed as being securely located within a static historical framework – a "striated" space governed by fixed responses and codes of behaviour.

Yet these people seem to lose their semblance of solidity as the natural world gradually overshadows them: "For all those figures of cloth and linen, of worthy British flesh and blood, and the souls tied to them temporarily, like tentative balloons, by the precious grace of life, might, of that sudden, have been cardboard or little wooden things, as their importance in the scene receded, and there predominated the great tongue of blue water, the brooding, indigenous trees, and

sky clutching at all" (113). The expedition, part of the colonial machinery of appropriation and subjugation, gradually takes on a dreamlike tone that threatens not only the imperial thrust of the journey but also the sense of solidity the white settlers have tried desperately to cultivate in their new homeland. Thus, at various points during preparations for the departure, Mr. Bonner is at a loss when he feels that he is not in command of the situation. He becomes relieved only when he feels restored to the material world. The point of departure has varied, powerful effects on the different characters in the novel. Mr. Bonner cannot wait for the ship to set sail: "Damn the ship" (115). The expedition takes on a heightened importance that does not include him and he tells the rest: "Our presence here is superfluous" (115). Belle Bonner, his daughter, is charged with an excitement that she cannot fathom while Laura, seemingly detached from all that is happening around her, is trapped in a bewildered state of confused knowing. "Everything has been said" (117), she tells Belle, although not a word has passed between her and Voss. As for the crowd, they "loitered, waiting for the wind. Some were swearing at the dust, some had got drunk, and were in danger of being taken up" (118).

All the characters in the text are implicated in this departure. Their voices and thoughts mingle and the whole scene is depicted in a quasi-dream atmosphere in which conscious and subconscious worlds overlap. This marks the tone for the rest of the expedition. Even Voss asks himself: "Is all this happening to me, a little boy, clinging to the *Heide* by the soles of his boots, beneath a rack of cloud and a net of twisted trees?" (110) The interior of the continent comes to symbolise

the subconscious, a terrain that is alien and frightening. This in turn explains the intense, rather inarticulate responses to the departure of the exploring party. Voss and the rest seem to be moving away from all that is familiar, especially a self in a particular, past context. "Smooth" spaces of the dream world coalesce with "striated" spaces of the settlement where identities are static. The act of travelling unsettles notions of identity. Even at the point of departure, identities are subsumed in a process of "becoming-journey", a process which becomes more pronounced as the travellers venture further into the desert. Apart from calling into focus notions of identity, there is the suggestion that this trip has implications for the future of Australia. The description of Belle's anxiety is revealing of this. Belle, feted and praised, is the darling of the Bonner household, the golden girl who holds out the promise of a golden future. But the expedition upsets her in a way that she "could not bear. . . . She was both afraid, and filled with a desire to mingle with what she did not understand, which was the future, perhaps, hence her necessity" (122). This excursion, then, also prefigures the future, one that is indeterminate but unavoidable, like Voss' compulsion to cross the desert and the relentless journey he undergoes. (The "future" motif in *Voss* will be explored in the next chapter).

From the moment the ship sets sail, the expedition increasingly becomes a metaphysical one in which attempts at reason and precision are constantly challenged. Judd, who is a natural choice for "keeper of instruments" (194) because of his profound reverence for tools of navigation, loses the big prismatic compass, searches furiously for it everywhere only to find it in his own saddle-bag.

The situation is just one of many that “assume the terrible relevant irrelevance of some dreams” (182). Eventually, when crossing a flooded river, the travellers lose all their specimens and instruments when they are washed away by the water. Without any means to direct them, the explorers find themselves wandering aimlessly in this “uninterrupted space” (189). It becomes difficult to differentiate reality from dreams. The days unfold in an inexorable sameness, “possessed of a similarity” (284). Voss, always confident of his own rationality, starts to sleepwalk. The telepathic journey he makes with Laura becomes so intertwined with the physical expedition that Laura’s presence becomes a constant in the expedition – she talks, walks and rides with the German explorer. Dreams sustain Voss during this arduous journey and he senses that they are “responsible” for his state of well-being (140).

The desert space through which the band of explorers traverse challenges the imperialist impulse that initiated the expedition, subverting the function of exploration as a “legitimation strategy for European conquest” (Hodge and Mishra 157). Distinctions of class and status that figure so dominantly in the striated space of Sydney evaporate in the desert. Hence differences in class and circumstance felt so keenly by Angus, the rich landowner, towards the alcoholic Turner, are reduced to “nothingness” in this long journey (253). Judd, the emancipist, assumes leadership over the group that mutinies. The travellers become “nomads.” The expedition fails to replicate itself as a microcosm of the structures of imperialism that it was meant to be. While the band of travellers are

given a grand, official send-off, there is no parallel homecoming ceremony. This journey is destined to go on. It is, as I will discuss later, a journey into the future.

White's narrative takes on elements of the "world of semblance" and the "world of dream" which communicate so poignantly throughout the novel (259). These worlds of physical and imaginative realities converge and configure the space in the narrative. The settler community resides in spaces where perceptions of reality are conceived through imperial discourse and knowledge production. Sydney, nestling on the outer rim of the continent, is portrayed as a provincial city. It bustles with people who seem reluctant to venture deeper into the landscape. In this striated space, material realities are important as they define the self. The Bonner house is representative of this kind of material presence and White's descriptions highlight the solidity of the house with its heavy furniture and numerous fittings. Voss feels uncomfortable here. On the other hand, the desert, harsh and uncompromising, is an unknown region which offers Voss possibilities for self-discovery. Indeed the language White uses to depict these two spaces differs vastly. The author's descriptions of the city are vivid but prosaic and this adds to the "solidity" of the portrayal of the city dwellers. Their "progress", what Bonner calls "solid achievement" (29), is constructed in terms of substantial reality. For instance, the description of the Bonner house is suffused with detail: "The room in which she sat was rather large, darkened by the furniture, of which the masses of mellow wood tended to daunt intruding light, although here and there, the surface of a striped mirror, or beaded stool, or some object in cut glass

bred triumphantly with the lustier of those beams which entered through the half-closed shutters" (8). This sharply contrasts with the nebulous, dreamlike quality of the desert and its inhabitants; both are evoked in hallucinatory prose, poetic in its effect: "During the morning a party of blacks appeared, first as shreds of shy bark glimpsed between the trunks of the trees, but always drifting, until, finally, they halted in human form upon the outskirts of the camp" (204).

The desert, however, is equally concrete (it is described in terms of stone and sand) and it is this materiality which offers considerable challenge to the explorers. But the desert's "solidity", unlike that of the Bonner house, does not anchor the self or offer a guarantee of singularity of identity – its space constantly displaces identities. Angus cannot maintain his superior sense of self in the desert and eventually "becomes-journey", as does Turner: "So the two men toiled on, each accepting the other's shortcomings in gratitude for the continued enjoyment of his own. Small figures on the same mountain, they were more alike than not" (259). The past lives of Voss and his men are negated as they proceed: "So they advanced into that country which now possessed them, looking back in amazement at their actual lives" (194). Though initially there is a feeling that the exploration is "an event of national significance" (78) which will help establish a sense of identity for white society, the journey has a contrary effect. In this context, Ivor Indyk's observations of the role of landscape in some Australian novels are helpful. "On 'The Land' as a Relative Absolute" explores the notion of place/space as "an absolute" that is relativistic, an idea akin to Lawrence's spirit of place in which the life-force of the land is imaged as dynamic, in constant

interplay with the self. Indyk writes: "To the extent that the spirit or energy which 'the land' embodies is fundamental to all living things, then clearly it functions as an absolute. But it is an absolute which is only known by its manifestations, in the land's features – and not simply in these elements, but in the transience of their attributes. . . . the very concept of 'the land' demands this perspective, the life-force is both omnipresent and elusive, both absolute and relative" (108). The "transience" of the desert landscape means that Voss cannot master it, just as he cannot lord over the Aborigines who seem to melt into the desert, emerging as amorphous, indeterminate beings outside the confines of any fixed historical parameters. The relativising power of the desert makes it a site where identities are challenged, not established. The desert place/space possesses a creative power which transforms the journey and the travellers.

The Creative Space in *Voss*

The conception and creation of space in *Voss* is one of its most intriguing features. The novel's innovative treatment of place/space not only raises questions regarding concepts of ownership and belonging but also shapes the journey in the text. The space in White's narrative is a creative space which reveals its own realities, both physical and metaphysical, to the explorers. In the transforming encounter, the travellers, especially Voss, are compelled to confront sides of their selves. When this happens, the traveller "becomes" space.

In chapter one, after Voss visits Mr. Bonner, there ensues an animated conversation among the people in the Bonner household about the German explorer. When discussing Voss and his incipient expedition into the Australian desert, the Bonners and their guests, white settlers in Australia, invariably touch on their own feelings towards their newly adopted homeland. Many uncomplimentary things are said about Voss but Laura, strangely, defends him – “strangely” because she has just met Voss for the first time. Laura tells the rest: “[Voss] does not intend to make a fortune out of this country, like other men. He is not all money talk” (28). She comments that Voss “is obsessed by this country” and “is not afraid” (28) and goes on to discredit herself and her listeners, saying that they are afraid and are still not “possessed of understanding”. “It is not my country”, she says, “although I have lived in it” (29). Unsettled by her observations, Tom Radclyffe retorts that Australia does not belong to the German explorer. Laura counters this remark by insisting that the country is Voss’ “by right of vision” (29). The uneasy conversation between Laura and the other characters serves to focus interpretations of belonging and origin. Unlike the white Australian settlers, Voss seems to possess a certain claim on the land, a claim that eludes the settlers who dwell here. Implicit in the conversation briefly discussed above is the settlers’ uncertainty about belonging to Australia. Their unease translates into a dismissal of the German. Voss’ presence and his impending journey raise doubts about the foundations of their own identity and their legitimate claim over the land. The exploration threatens to expose the myth of white settler belonging.

Voss' dialogue with Laura in the earlier half of chapter one not only foreshadows the aforementioned conversation but also sets a pattern that serves to separate Voss from the other characters in the novel. The discussion makes Laura aware of her own tentative responses to the continent. Though overbearing and arrogant, Voss demonstrates an uncanny sensitivity to the country: "A pity that you huddle Your country is of great subtlety" (11). Although new to the land, his many assertions of understanding and knowledge of the space he wishes to traverse make him a natural leader of the group of mainly Anglo-Australian settlers who venture out to explore the interior of the continent and who, unlike Voss, seem less assured of the task. The cloistered, immobile existence of the settlers shapes their shallow responses to the country. The text is littered with exchanges between Voss and the Australian settlers which suggest the latter's superficial understanding of their homeland. Pringle's warning that the interior of Australia would probably resemble the bottom of the sea and, hence, its exploration yield nothing of interest, is countered by Voss' remark that since neither of them have walked on the sea bed, this expedition could only look forward to newness and discovery.

A Thousand Plateaus reiterates the notion that striated and smooth spaces exist only in mixture and one space seeps into the other as "a correlation between the two, a recapitulation of one in the other, a furtherance of one through the other. Yet the complex difference persists" (Deleuze and Guattari 477). While rigid

binaries that differentiate what could be called “nomad” from “sedentary” space are initially instituted in *Voss*, these spaces mingle with greater intensity as the narrative unfolds. White does not abruptly dissolve the boundaries separating the two spaces but creates other spaces between the striated and the smooth spaces until at points they completely overlap. Voss’ journey into the interior of the continent constitutes the crossing of different boundaries or imaginary grids before reaching the heartland. The first stop is Rhine Towers which is home to the Sandersons. They are rich people who possess a sensitivity and knowledge lacking in the Bonners. Though also white settlers, they inhabit a space which could be described as “less striated” than that occupied by the fringe dwellers. Bewitched by the “gentle, healing landscape” (124), Voss decides that it would be easy to live in this space, “the fat lands of the settlers” (124).

At the next stop, Jildra, the hold of settlement becomes weaker. This is rougher country. Brendan Boyle, who lives here, has made good but has turned his back on the trappings of civilization: he “was of that order of males who will destroy any distinction with which they have been born, because it accuses them, they feel, and they cannot bear the shame of it” (166). He lives frugally in a dilapidated shack, close to the Aborigines. Though Jildra is nearer the desert, its space is neither smooth nor striated and so here Voss still feels a “victim of his European, or even his human inheritance” (170). Boyle, though “an escapee from the civilisation of the Old World”, is still a landowner who exerts power over the blacks at his station (Kiernan 1980: 53). Rhine Towers and Jildra manifest

gradations of civilised life. They also symbolically represent the different layers of consciousness that Voss must encounter before he can find selfhood. As Boyle tells Voss: "To peel down to the last layer. . . . There is always another, and yet another, of more exquisite subtlety. Of course, every man has his own obsession. Yours would be, it seems, to overcome distance, but in much the same way, of deeper layers, of irresistible disaster" (167). Green describes White's narrative as moving "in gradually contracting circles" (290). The concentric pattern in the text is emblematic: the outermost circle, i.e. the fringe of the continent, represents the "thin layer of the conscious" while its heartland symbolises the "depths of the unconscious" (Green 290). Consequently, Voss' journey is a "progress of penetration to the centre of his being" (Green 290). The people at Rhine Towers could be described as the "thin layer of the conscious", willing to move away from the known. However, theirs is only a "partial" movement (Green 292) from spaces that fix identity. Jildra represents a "layer" closer to the subconscious but traces of imperialism are still discernible here and so Boyle's situation is only a version of what Voss is moving towards.²

Therefore, between the two points which mark the beginning (a "striated" space) and the destination (a "smooth" space) of the journey, there are other spaces. The travel motif in the text follows a movement resembling a peeling or casting away of different layers of space until the traveller arrives at a core or centre. The

² Green calls it "a caricature" of Voss's impending situation. What makes Boyle different from Voss is the sententious streak in the former. See Green, "Voss: Stubborn Music," *The Australian Experience: Critical Essays on Australian Novels*, ed. W.S.Ramson (Canberra: Australian National UP, 1974) 293.

advance of the expedition in “contracting circles” indicates that the travel trope in the text also follows a “contracting” motion which creates a travel movement that is centripetal in nature. As Voss progresses deeper into the continent, he gravitates towards the very core of his being. Yet, while he arrives at self-knowledge at the end of the expedition, this only comes about because there is a prior centrifugal movement. This inner-outer travel movement overrides any linear trajectory. As a spatial device, “contracting circles” impose boundaries on the spaces through which the expedition party travels. These bounded spaces, as discussed above, determine the types of characters that live within their confines. But alongside this spatial pattern, there is also the sense that space constantly transcends boundaries and this notion is evoked by the close interplay of the desert and the domestic worlds in *Voss*. Both are seen as spaces that are at once distinct and linked. The dialectic between “the world of semblance” and the “world of dream” (259) underlines the importance of the outer and the inner journey in White’s novel. It also gives precedence to the idea of becoming: by blurring rigid boundaries and mixing the substantial with the indeterminate, it is possible for the traveller to attain selfhood. A good example of the mingling of inner and outer worlds is the episode in which Laura “travels” with Voss and his men in the desert: “As he was debating this, Laura Trevelyan rode alongside, although there was barely room for two horses abreast on that narrow path. ‘You will not leave me then?’ he asked. ‘Not for a moment,’ she said. ‘Never, never’” (366-7).

Laura's metaphysical journey brings her as much physical and mental suffering as that endured by the explorers in the desert. When the Aborigines take Voss captive, Laura becomes ill, only coming out of her fever when he is executed. Laura learns at home the same lessons of humility and love that Voss comes to understand in the desert. The domestic sphere becomes the desert for her. Both realms, then, the one of semblance and the one of dreams, seamlessly mingle. Mr. Bonner, initially so secure and well-placed, gradually feels like an intruder in his own home. As Mr. and Mrs. Bonner go through the agony of thinking that their niece is dying of an illness that cannot be diagnosed, their house loses its comforting solidity. Mr. Bonner could no longer be alone "in the desert that the house had become" and Mrs. Bonner is described dressing herself "as if for a journey" (357). "These two people, looking at each other at intervals, in hope of rescue, had begun to realize that their whole lives had been a process of erosion. Oases of affection had made the desert endurable, until now the fierce heat of unreason threatened to wither any such refuge" (357-8). The treasured substantiality of their existence is shaken. The journey, which Mr. Bonner has sponsored, upsets the traditions and foundations that support his beliefs and understanding of life.

The other city dwellers are also drawn into the expedition in different ways. When Rose (a servant at the Bonner household) gives birth to Mercy, the baby becomes Laura's child with Voss in the dream world. Colonel Hebden is tortured to discover the details of Voss' expedition, becoming "unwisely obsessed" with the

“souls of the dead country” (422). Indeed the material and spiritual spheres are so completely locked together that the journey is even imaged, very hauntingly, as departing from the home of the Bonners: “So the party rode down the terrible basalt stairs of the Bonners’ deserted house, and onward. Sometimes the horses’ hooves would strike sparks from the outcrops of jagged rock” (358). In *Voss*, imaginary and immediate worlds occupy the same site of enunciation. This is in line with the concept of “nomadology” with its “collective assemblage of enunciation” (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 23). What happens then in *Voss* is that the borders between substantial and spiritual worlds become so permeable that at points one world becomes indistinguishable from the other. Therefore, though Voss vehemently declines Laura’s offer to pray for him during the journey, her spiritual presence in the desert is pervasive and she is largely responsible for the explorer’s redemption at the end. Even Voss’ own insistence that the land can be separated into spaces that he believes he can relate to (the desert) and that repel him (the city) falters as he travels deeper into the continent. Like Voss and his men, the reader too grows increasingly disorientated about time and the distance covered by the explorers. When temporal and spatial dimensions are suspended, the boundaries, which, initially, clearly distinguish spaces and characters in the text, gradually weaken. Close to the end of their deaths, as Voss and Harry Robarts ride along with the Aborigines, they are all described as being similar, there being “little distinction between skins, between men and horses even. Space had blurred the details” (366).

Voss' relationship with the place/space of Australia is unique. From the start, his reserve towards the other characters in the narrative stems not from his insecurity at being a foreigner in this new country but from his own sense of superiority over the rest. Nevertheless, as pointed out earlier, Voss respects the land. The desert, at once elusive and solid, appeals to the explorer: "the mineral forms were an everlasting source of wonder; feldspar, for instance, was admirable, and his own name a crystal in his mouth. If he were to leave that name on the land, irrevocably, his material body swallowed by what it had named, it would be rather on some desert place, a perfect abstraction, that would rouse no feeling of tenderness in posterity" (41). The extract illuminates Voss' perception of the space he wants to traverse. For all his professed regard for the land, he considers the desert as Other – a space where he can impose his will and inscribe his own divinity. His initial engagement with the land extends purely from within so that the relationship between self and place plays itself out on a metaphysical plane. Laura intuitively senses Voss' particular attitude towards the desert space: "You are so isolated. That is why you are fascinated by the prospect of desert places, in which you will find your own situation taken for granted, or more than that, exalted" (87-8). Hence the Australian desert for Voss is "a perfect abstraction" (41), a place/space that exists only as an idea, removed from physical reality and divested of other narratives and histories.

By choosing to see the landscape as rival, the only opponent worthy of his attention, Voss actually Others the desert. This is precisely why, for all his

feelings of estrangement towards the settlers, Voss' intention to chart the desert space is complicit with the white community's desire to appropriate the land. Voss is the foreigner who wishes to conquer the interior of the Australian continent. His presence unnerves the white settlers and conjures a feeling of ambivalence among the Aborigines. The need to impose his indomitable will on the land is similar to colonial subjugation of place. When Mr. Bonner asks Voss if he has "studied the map", he replies, "I will first make it" (23). Voss' desire for cartographical representation can be read in two ways. First, it is reminiscent of early explorers who were driven to "fill" the empty spaces of the map. Voss, then, engages with the land on a basis of dominance and acquisition. Indeed the pomp surrounding the departure of the ship *Osprey* in the early part of the novel is reminiscent of departure ceremonies of important voyages of conquest in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Second, Voss' declaration to make a map also points to a negation of the physical reality of the space he wishes to explore. The desert's material dimension does not concern him. "[I]n this disturbing country", Voss tells Le Mesurier, "it is possible more easily to discard the inessential and to attempt the infinite" (35). Material things, he asserts, are "immaterial" (38). Hence he perceives the hinterland as a space minus the trappings of history and solid tangibility; in other words, a bodiless space.

Indeed a significant trait in Voss is his aversion to corporeality. He even feels a "victim of his [own] body" (26) and is repelled by acts of kindness or concern because he associates them with taking care of the body. For him, the physical

body signals human frailty. Consequently, it is significant that Voss himself is constantly imaged in metaphors of stone. He is described as being “in the nature of a second monolith, of more friable stone, of nervous splinters, and dark mineral deposits” (136), “assimilated to a form in nature and endowed with a mysterious Wordsworthian existence” (Walsh 1986: 25). By deliberately emphasising the substantial aspect of Voss’ being, White also highlights the importance of the empirical landscape through which the explorer travels. All too often critics focus on the metaphysical features of Voss’ journey. For instance, in readings that concentrate on the spiritual motif in White’s text, the inland journey takes on connotations of a pilgrimage, the travellers emerge as disciples and the German explorer assumes a Christlike role. Most of the events in the narrative are seen as having spiritual overtones. Palfreyman’s death due to a spear wound in his side reminds the reader of Christ’s pierced body on the cross. Judd’s decision to leave the band of explorers resembles the apostle Judas’ betrayal of Christ. Yet Voss, who deifies self and mistrusts all “that [is] external to himself” (21), can only be redeemed if he acknowledges the physical world. It is the *journey* that undercuts Voss’ conception of space as an abstraction. Though he tells his men: “I do meet scarcely a man here . . . who does not suspect he will be unmade by his country. Instead of knowing that he will make it into what he wishes” (40), the land does “unmake” the traveller and he is forced to come to terms with the empirical landscape through which he travels. The accidents, illnesses, hunger and thirst that beset him and his men during the expedition impels Voss to recognise his own vulnerability, and, finally, mortality. The explorer must come to see the desert

space in terms of his own travels and not assimilate its features to a pre-existing scheme.

Voss has to engage with place/space on its own terms and be subject to its empirical realities before he can achieve total selfhood. John McLaren astutely observes that in White's narratives, landscape is not only a metaphor that reflects human situations but is also "an active constituent of the selves we create" (x). The description of Voss' death images him as "becoming" part of the place/space: "His dreams fled into the air, his blood ran out upon the dry earth, which drank it up immediately" (394). The desert is a site of transition – a "smooth" space where transformation of self is possible. Though the desert landscape is symbolic, open to various meanings, its empirical dimension is also important. The possibilities of finding self- and place- identities necessarily take place in a substantial world and White's novel, despite its pervasive metaphysical theme, insists on this idea. The inner world must play itself out in the outer. As an epigraph in White's novel *The Solid Mandala* suggests, "there is another world, but it is in this one" (5).

White's narrative interrogates concepts like appropriation, subjugation, legitimacy and belonging to a place/space within the framework of the exploration genre. In white Australian history, since explorers heralded the beginnings of colonial presence in a country, exploration played a vital role in the machinery of colonisation. *Voss* demonstrates the way imperial history not only stratified the fringes of the Australian continent but also tried to control its interior. The desert

is defined as an opposition to the values emanating from the fringe dwellers. However, the hollowness of the settler community's responses to Australia manifests an incomprehensibility that is derivative of the suppression of the histories of the place. By problematising the exploration ethos, *Voss* offers possibilities for alternative histories. The pervasive Aboriginal presence in the text, especially, represents a subversive, resisting force to the colonial teleological agenda.³ From the start, Dugald and Jackie, the Aboriginal guides accompanying the travellers, display a sense of belonging to the land that evades the white explorers. For Voss, the particular sound the Aborigines' feet make on the earth "[establish] their ownership" (169). The other Aborigines whom the travellers meet on their journey appear like apparitions that seem to merge into the landscape. White's portrayal of the desert dwellers seems to fit in with the concept of "nomadology" outlined by Deleuze and Guattari in which nomadic tribes impose no fixed boundaries on a territory but occupy a space to the extent of their needs and then move on. This would suggest that their beings "fill" a space so that self and space become one. At the end of his journey, Voss too "becomes" space. The challenges put forward by the actual landscape and its inhabitants divest him of his role as leader and saviour. He is forced to depend on the other travellers and finally submits to the Aborigines. Self and place/space are portrayed as equally amenable: Voss "becomes" part of the desert which is itself a "smooth" space that defies fixities of national and even personal identity.

³ My next chapter looks at the Aboriginal presence in *Voss*.

Conclusion

Knowledge was never a matter of geography. Quite the reverse, it overflows all maps that exist.

White, P. 1975: 446

Ultimately Voss fulfils his promise to make a map. The map, however, does not stratify space and draw limiting boundaries. Voss' cartographic effort follows the logic of the desert and creates a "rhizomatic" space that is vast, boundless and ever changing. "Smooth" and "striated" spaces coalesce in the text, creating a dialectic between traveller (self) and land (Other). The interplay of physical and spiritual dimensions of place/space, evoked especially by the differing prose styles adopted by White to conjure the worlds of semblance and dream, configures a creative place/space which allows the remaking of being. Boundaries are crossed but Voss has first to acknowledge them as they exert limits on his will. Similar in its treatment of place/space to the three texts discussed in earlier chapters, White's narrative foregrounds the realities of an actual landscape. The relativising power of place has the ability to transform and absorb and so the whole expedition in *Voss* enacts a process of "becoming". The desert place/space, which sets values in the perspective of Otherness, unsettles fixed conceptions of identity and belonging. In "nomadic" travel, the self dissolves so as to embrace the Other and this is manifested in the centripetal mode of travel in the narrative which enables the self

to transform into the Other selves it must become. In the Otherness of place/space, Voss discovers his own Otherness and finds self.