

*The Well-Dressed Pacific Explorer:
Thea Astley's "Beachmasters,"
a Study in Displacement*

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WHITE AUSTRALIA has had a long, though thinly spread, imaginative involvement in the Pacific region, drawing on the European interests, following Cook's voyages, that formed the Pacific links during the age of sail — the Californian Gold Rush, sealing, whaling, and sandalwood gathering, and notably the 'Blackbirding industry.' Louis Becke's stories, as well as a host of popular writing of the New South Wales Bookstall adventure-romance kind, fit into a wider literature in which the extreme of Paradise and promise of riches (after Stacpoole's *Blue Lagoon* and Wyss's *Swiss Family Robinson*) has been offset by visions of perdition and dissipation (as in Melville's *Moby Dick* and Golding's *Lord of the Flies*), all within the general context of an outsider looking at the 'space' of Oceania as a kind of adventure playground, to be visited either for delightfully unrestrained indulgence, or for moral, physical, and intellectual testing in order to confirm colonialist values.

In modern times the involvement of Australia in the Pacific has taken three primary forms — fighting in the Second World War, direct colonialism in Papua New Guinea, and its indirect aftermath, tourism, predominantly in South-West Polynesia, Fiji, and Vanuatu. Reflections in fiction of this involvement initially produced works in the same 'gung-ho adventure' mould as pre-war writing on the Pacific — for instance, Morris West's *Kundu* (1957) or Maslyn Williams' *The Far Side of the Sky* (1967). From the sixties onwards, however, novels have become more

aware of the ironies and contradictions of an 'innocent' would-be independent and egalitarian ex-colony running a colony of its own. J. C. O'Donnell's *Time Expired* (1967) and Trevor Shearston's stories, *Something in the Blood* (1979), exemplify a literary process of self-questioning emerging from the New Guinea experience, while Australia's role in Fiji's plantation industry is implicitly analysed in Alex Buzo's play, *The Marginal Farm* (1985). With this self-criticism, there has also been a move towards greater creative use of indigenous cultural dynamics and language. Randolph Stow's *Visitants* (1979) and Shearston's *White Lies* (1986) are instances of this development.

One of the recent Australian literary works to deal with the Pacific is Thea Astley's *Beachmasters* (1985). This is a fascinating novel the opening of which establishes its consistently complex operations:

In the waters of these islands there is a certain fish whose eyes, like the eyes of the chameleon, are able to look in opposite directions at the same time.

Like aeland Kristi.

Kristi last winter and the summer before that, while the wind off the Channel was munched by the wooden teeth of the shutters.

Like man Kristi — man bush or man solwata.

Like the colons and the British ex-patriates and the rag dolls District Agent Cordingley and his wife Belle and French District Agent Boutin and Planter Salway and his grandson Gavi and Gavi's maman, Lucie Ela, and Madame Guichet and Chloe of the Dancing Bears and a beach bum from the big land, man blong Australia, whose real name was never known, with a lifetime of small riots behind and more in his blood like bubbles.

And, too, oh in this litany, pray, your eyes east-west, pray for Hedmasta Woodful, now and at the hour of the changing, and for the Bonsers, mechanics of more than boat engines, for Planter Duchard and family, and above all, for the big man, the yeremanu, Tommy Narota, part Kristi, part Tongan, part Devon, who has taken on his new native name, abandoning that of his sea-faring adventurer daddy, along with his ceremonial dress of Bipi fringed tablecloth and lace antimacassar loin-wrapper. Send your prayers east-west or north-south for the vanikoro to pluck up with its swoop of a beak.

And pray in three tongues: in Seaspeak, in English, in French; for there are three ways of praying.

The eyes move two ways. The voice moves three. Two-eyed.

Triple-tongued. While the wind is eaten by the shutters and the small canoes move down the thick blue waters of the Channel towards Trinitas or Emba. (1)

On the face of it, this is a virtuoso display, not unlike Randolph Stow's polyphonic *Visitants*, by an experimental writer. It is a curious book, however, that shifts its sympathies, displacing its centre to hover between centripetal and centrifugal movements, so that by the time we arrive at its ending, the nature of Astley's achievement is not immediately clear. It is a definite literary achievement, no doubt, and a deliberate one — the author took two years and four drafts before being satisfied with the result (Ross 265). But how and what it achieves (and why) are problematic questions.

The first, most obvious reading of Astley's complexity is simply as a skilful attempt to represent a complex society in the throes of resolving an especially intricate colonial past. Astley herself declares that the sometimes off-putting artifice of her prose (she is an admirer of Gerard Manley Hopkins) is fundamentally realist: "When I use metaphors, that is what I am trying to do: to get at the exact nature of something" (Ross 265). The something here is the late-colonial world of the New Hebrides, that historical curiosity born of treaties which were suited to European political expediency and signed in total disregard of their effects on 'possessions' at the other end of the world. As the novel clearly shows, the result for what is now Vanuatu was a Condominium government that inefficiently doubled up on every trivial aspect of administration and imposed two languages on an already linguistically diverse island group. Other differences of cultural style further complicated matters. Astley talks of the different attitudes towards natives: the French would physically brutalise their labour, but recognise native humanity to the point of condoning intermarriage; the British exercised a more kindly paternalism but drew the line at consorting with their subjects (Baker 46). The only consolation for the native was that the English and French spent so much energy bickering with each other that there was little left to do more than maintain a working peace amongst the local inhabitants. Not for nothing was the colony popularly named 'Pandemonium' (see Lini), and it is this that we see in the plurivocal, multi-perspective opening of *Beachmasters*.

As a reflection of this world, the text seems even more radically open-ended and accepting than most other novels on the Pacific. Astley jumps from vignette to vignette, presents a situation and withdraws from it without an attempt to pack it into a tidy frame of meaning that will be of some significance to the largely non-Vanuatu readership. Here there is a kind of mimesis of condominium social reality, with Astley being the honest outsider 'telling it like it is,' apparently working through limited vision within structures of fragmentation, pluralism and displacement.

Beachmasters tells the story of a young boy, Gavi Salway, who, in discovering his mixed-race origins, becomes involved in an abortive secessionist and land-rights movement led by his uncle. His island home is populated by a whole range of 'displaced persons,' many of whom are physically removed and psychologically alienated as a result of the political upheaval. The obvious figures of displacement are the representatives of colonial administration — from government officers to teachers and priests — who not only are geographically displaced from their homelands, but have the task of displacing their culture and authority onto the local inhabitants. Then there are the long-established plantation owners, like Gavi's grandfather, who have made themselves at home by displacing the indigenous population. The War has also caused certain displacements: Chloe Dancing Bears (so named after the bar/brothel she has managed for years) stays on after the evacuation of the white civilians, her quest for adventure leaving her isolated in her own community; Tommy Narota, Gavi's uncle, is culturally destabilised by the war, and he displaces his identity and skills onto traditional indigenous roles, becoming a 'big man' (*yeremanu*) at the centre of his own village while marginalising himself further from his white heritage and the centre of colonial power. Assorted expatriates and locals of a more or less mercenary kind operate along the beachfront, moving back and forth amongst native, planter, and white officialdom. Shifting boundaries of identity, culture, and power result in a network of displaced, or misplaced, affections, trust, and meanings. Language itself in this multilingual community becomes a sign of division as well as of unity: Seaspeak hovers ambiguously between English and French. A black student beats up his French schoolmate for 'putting him

down' by using this 'pidgin' — "Don't give me that *masta* talk!" (18) — whereas the Assistant Resident Commissioner becomes a figure of ridicule in his incompetent efforts to wield this tricky implement of power. Developed as a lingua franca by linguistically divided plantation labour, "it was the islanders' parody, but the parodees — the government officials, the traders and planters — too lazy or too dull to learn native dialects, seized on it as if it were their own vile joke" (110). The joke is turned again by the rebel Talasa Party:

Then a guard appeared and sauntered over to Woodful's car, looking down at him, eyes large and amused and holding no threat at all. He gave a winner's smile.

"Good afternoon, Hedmasta." His smile widened. (Were there shouts and loud hoots from the stalls?) Woodful remembered him as form captain three years before. "We have been expecting you."

The grin exploded into mirth. He'd had four years of Hedmasta Woodful raging against Seaspeak. "*You go insaid long ofis,*" he managed. He could hardly get the words out for hilarity. "*Smôl tai'm. Youmi tok tok bisnis.*"

Woodful's years of struggle, like the riot day itself, were dissolving in slow and expected reversals. (77)

Despite the apparently artistic arrangement of patterns of displacement, and its often farcical situations, Astley's story is founded on fact. Details may be checked in the journalistic account, *The Coconut War*, by Richard Shears (1980). In brief, it retells the traditionalist rebellion on the island of Santo ('Kristi') against British and French colonial interests and Walter Lini's federalist independent Vanuatu, in which power is centred at Vila ('Port Lena') on Efate ('Trinitas'). A missionary gives a contemporary outline of the situation:

Today in the New Hebrides, there is a movement called Nagriamel, begun by Jimmy Stevens about 1968. In its early stages if you substituted the word 'land' for 'cargo', then Jimmy's speeches had all the marks of a modern-day cargo cult prophet. No magic or mumbo jumbo for Jimmy. If you wanted to join, you paid up your two dollars and looked forward to the day when your lands, alienated by the white man from your grandfather for one stick of tobacco, would be restored to you. Jimmy is currently [1976] in the news because of his demands for the withdrawal of the Condominium Administration by the 1st August and the setting up of

the island of Santo as an independent republic. In this move he is supported by several American business interests. Every night pirate radio station Vanato violates the rules of broadcasting and the Administrations have nothing to say. The British do not have enough police to force a confrontation and the French are trying to woo Jimmy to their support and don't want to create bad feeling. (Calvert 201)

In the novel Tommy Narota is, of course, Jimmy Stevens, and his fate matches that of the real secessionist leader. The movement was ultimately put down with military aid from Papua New Guinea.

Astley says she heard of the story, and was attracted by the idea of the little man with charisma battling the combined forces of European colonialism and American commercial imperialism (Ross 265). She subsequently went back to Vanuatu to interview people who lived through the troubles, and checked books to get the language right (Ross 265; Baker 45). We can, therefore, read the novel as a realistic fictional dramatisation of historical events in one corner of the Pacific.

Such an obvious reading comes up against problems of interpretation. If the tale is a liberal championing of the battle of the small man against the system, why is Tommy not more central to the action? Why is his tragedy offset by an all-encompassing comic-opera featuring satiric caricatures? Why is the moral viewpoint of the book not more definite? Why fictionalise the story in a mass of metaphor anyway? One answer to these questions can be formulated if we consider the text within the problematic discourse of tourism. It is, after all, primarily as a tourist that Astley has experienced Vanuatu. That status is reflected in her earlier novel set in the islands, *A Boat Load of Home Folk* (1968). As a writer, and one long resident in Queensland, she would be sensitive to the colonialist implications of the tourist trade, especially in a place that her countrymen once raided, "trucking flesh" for virtual slave labour on sugar farms (42). Therefore, she occupies an ambiguous space even before putting pen to paper. As a member of an ex-colony of Britain, she is 'innocent' and can express solidarity with native aspirations in the Pacific; as a representative of a colonial presence in the region, she is implicated morally in historical guilt and sep-

arated from identifying with local concerns. Finally, tourism itself has inherent complexities that must subtly manifest themselves in writing arising from modern travel.

One of Thea Astley's early works was entitled *The Well Dressed Explorer* (1962). *Beachmasters* is a well-dressed (stylish) book of a particular kind of exploring founded upon a tourist's experience. The tourist goes somewhere else, mingles with strangely other people in order better to appreciate home and self. The tourist is two-faced, has double vision, is relaxed because on holiday and tense because abroad (see Crick). As a poem by one of the characters of *A Boat Load of Home Folk* puts it, "*The stranger-friends are voiced with double-truths . . .*" (83). Here, both identity and meaning are displacements.

The tourist never relinquishes his/her identity as stranger, but often spends a good deal of energy in friendly denial of the role of run-of-the-mill tourist. One of Astley's primary strategies is to denigrate every other kind of traveller within range. So in *Beachmasters* everyone is a target for satiric exposure: the expatriate 'ocker' Australian, the pompous British colonial ass, the scheming cosmopolitan French administrator, the well-meaning but sterile English schoolmaster. Not even the natives escape this kind of censure: Tommy Narota is not a 'real' native anyway, and is a bit of a clown (13); Gavi's schoolmate, Vuma, is genuinely indigenous but is portrayed as an immature hothead (18-22). It is all, we are tempted to conclude, a typical piece of touristic one-upmanship in which the travelling writer (and the reading mental traveller) has to establish *bona fides* of greater knowledge and sensitivity than the rest of the herd.

Tourist stories hover between objective documentary and subjective fantasy, between judgemental constraint (the representative of a "parent" civilisation watching "children" at play) and libidinous freedom (the tourist relaxing, freed from home conventions, becoming a child at play). They serve both as accounts of private encounters with some disturbing exotic Other, and as public items of entertainment that need to be 'tamed' to culturally familiar models to be intelligible to a home audience. In narrative terms, there is a negotiation between mimetic reproduction of a 'present' limited understanding (manifested as proliferating, in-

complete fragments), on the one hand, and the rhetorical fabrication, both retrospective and anticipatory, of a comprehended whole (seen in an ordering and integrating of events), on the other. The narrative of *Beachmasters* exists in a state of flux between these polarities, partly to reproduce the ambiguous condition of island life — the centre of its own world, but peripheral to any other (149-50, 176, 180) — partly to adumbrate insider/outsider touristic ambivalence of the narrative position. In this latter context, the characters and the voice of the novel shift ground in order to avoid the two identity-threatening experiences facing the cross-cultural traveller: rejection by the Other, or absorption into the Other. In both cases, the traveller (both powerfully expansionist and vulnerably marginal for being at the boundary between home and abroad) is obliterated on the basis of his or her unusual identity. In *Beachmasters* we can see these two fates enacted in the expatriate community: under the stress of conflict, most of its members leave or are expelled from the island, while Lorimer, who to all intents and purposes has 'gone native,' becomes a shadowy presence finally removed in the one senseless death of the 'uprising.'

I think it is fair to say that such fears of personal dissolution assail both the colonial representative and the tourist because, to be most successful in either role, they must be most open to learning native ways or enjoying the 'lure of the exotic.' We can see the conflict most clearly in the tourist, whose ultimate goal is a paradoxical effacement — to escape the prepackaged routes and roles in order to see the *real* countryside — but whose very identity as tourist relies on the preservation of some distance from the new reality so that s/he can return home both refreshed but also only superficially affected. In the case of the colonial officer, the whole purpose of his (usually, only 'his') presence is to impose a dominant narrative on a subjected culture. He/she can look down on the tourist by virtue of being an 'old hand' possessed (supposedly) of greater, more authentic local knowledge. But the colonialist is also part of a rigidly defined 'package tour' in which experiences of a foreign (inferior) culture can only be recognised if they conform to acceptable, known categories. The new obviously must call old categories into question, however, and the effective inculcation of old ways (new to the native) requires intimate knowledge of the

new (old/native/traditional) culture. The confusion is reflected in the generic displacements of many colonial writings, with their unusual blend of explorer's diary, official report, ethnographical survey, and traveller's tale.

Beachmasters makes plain that tourist and colonialist narratives overlap, since the various kinds of colonial are essentially sojourners on a tour of duty, destined to return home. British Assistant Resident Commissioner, Walter Trembath, demonstrates the ambiguous role of the white colonial (and the difference between British and French) when he appears variously, officially in parade-ground starched whites and sword — deflatingly localised by the label “*sing-sing rags*” — or in the expatriate ‘uniform’ of shorts, T-shirt, and flip-flops, or in a touristy rig-out of native *lap-lap* playing bongos at the town nightclub (11). Both tourist and colonialist narratives tend to adopt two conflicting literary models: the heroic epic voyage, ending in a return home with spoils of adventure, and the *Bildungsroman*, enacting overseas travel as a stage or series of stages of some personal ‘getting of wisdom’ drama. Whereas the wandering hero/ine of the Romance adventure must be insulated against the Siren effects of new knowledge in order to possess the goal of the quest and return home unscathed, the scholar-gypsy of the Romantic *Bildungsroman* must also allow that knowledge some impact on the psyche in order to become ‘enriched,’ wiser, a new person.

Astley reflects these contradictory and shifting impulses in her fiction, perhaps seeking to resolve them by focusing on two mixed-race characters tragically caught between constructing personal eclectic identities from the wider world of colonial history and answering to the exclusivist claims of tradition and colonialism within the narrow confines of insular society. Tommy Narota, considered too smart for “custom” by the French priest, is finally absorbed into it and imprisoned on the island, while Gavi is expelled/liberated into the world. They enact the dream of fulfilment that is also the nightmare of the tourist-expatriate, together tenuously balancing the unstable equation of *belonging = not belonging* that also appears in the countering of the novel's pluralistic openness, its hybridity (a written Western text claiming to function as an oral Vanuatu “*storian*” narrative), by a reliance upon meta-

phoric/'poetic' unity imposed by the writer's virtuosity and the requirements of tidy fictive closure.

The kind of expected narrative trajectory mentioned above suggests that our sympathies should lie with Tommy and/or Gavi, but their quests finally fail; given the caustic humour of Thea Astley, there is the danger that we will come away from this book with the feeling that the events of the story and the characters who suffer within it are somehow absurd — that there is no tragedy in the Pacific; the tides of history rise and fall and nothing matters much. In *The Loss of El Dorado*, V. S. Naipaul responds to such a view of Third World affairs; it is a convenient view of a region that relies on images of its placidity to keep tourism alive — we can smile at the wily incompetence of the native revolutionaries, gloat over the colonials getting their comeuppance, and experience the excitement of social upheaval while sympathising with the few who get caught in between, because hardly anyone gets hurt, everything will be the same in a while, and we can go back to sunbaking on the beach or go home feeling wiser and more privileged than others. This kind of neo-colonialist closure is matched by the tendency, generated by all the satire, for the novel to appear as a traditional one with a definite moral centre. But the targets of scorn and outrage are so many and varied that we are left with the apparently neutral pluralism of the opening 'prayer.'

Yet, we cannot be sure of such open-ended neutrality. In the overall structure of the novel, we see a deliberate artifice of closure: Gavi's final contact with his uncle at the gaol gates repeats the first scene of the story proper. And in the italicised prologue a disembodied voice exhorts us to pray multilingually while privileging one of the three languages (and not the local one) as the narrative norm. If it is not exactly identifiable as the authorial narrating persona, it is certainly no limited voice within the drama represented. A monovalent, centristic reading, however, is countered by the facts that Gavi never really meets Narota, and is about to be deported from Kristi having already been evicted from his childhood (and Pacific) innocence. Other cyclic unities are generated; the exchange of flutes mentioned in Lorimer's diary (151, 156) is recalled in the metaphor of the manipulative Frenchman Mercet as the flute player who read the notes of island politics

incorrectly (171). As this instance indicates, though, the repetition of signs rarely exerts total closure, since it allows for a shifting of significance.

Beneath the unresolvable ambiguities of the 'tourist discourse' in *Beachmasters* there are deeper contradictions relating to post-colonialism that are most apparently reflected in the central phenomenon of Tommy Narota's cargo cult liberation movement. The New Hebrides, of course, have been famous for the John Frum cargo cult on Tanna, which emerged out of exactly the kind of experience depicted in the novel when Tommy witnesses the wholesale bombardment by and then destruction of wartime equipment (6-7). Cargo cults are both a sign of colonial deprivation and an assertive, subversive claim upon the power and material goods of the master culture. They also displace historical and materialist aspirations onto the spiritual plane, converting present lack into future promise. They enact a process of dissolution and are closed off in chaos and tragedy, but they also resist closure within worldly activity, creating new symbolic social structures. Such cults result from the hybridising of old and new ways, but are based on millennialist expectations of a restoration of proper, original, and indigenous worldly order.

For the adventurer possessed of a post-colonial consciousness, whether cargo cult leader or expatriate-cum-tourist, displacement becomes a natural feature of the existential landscape: home and the quester's goal become themselves others, ambiguously located everywhere and within. Being at home is being simultaneously expelled and imprisoned, being colonial to one group and colonised to another, inhabiting a beachfront where the future is forever, and forever already past. The title itself is equivocal — it is not entirely clear just who are the masters of the beach or what the nature of their mastery is. In any case, the beach is an area of shifting limits and fluctuating contacts. It is, in the consistently metaphoric imagery of the novel, constantly under attack from the gnawing wind and devouring currents of the Channel. The story and its images assume contradictory patterns of eat/be eaten (84), of looking/not looking (12-13), of knowing/not knowing (Gavi's problem and the condition of the novel as a story of political intrigue), of natives being taught too much and not enough by colo-

nial rule (75). This unsettling dialectical patterning contains a hierarchical gradation, though, that suggests a fundamentally unified position. Just as all the voices find expression via one narrating voice, so all the people of Kristi are ranked on some scale of authenticity that follows history back to a romantic source, overseen by the *vanikoro* bird, where time, nature, and *man bush* exist in organic unity (Walker 19). At one point in the book the tone drops its usual sardonicism to become quite lyrical:

How do you count the years on these islands?

There are no seasons, making it easy for the one two three four of it.

Perhaps you could say two: the wet and the dry; the lousy, the lousier.

But for someone born in unending summer — more than that: equatorial lava uneased even by the Trades — born into the lap of hurricanes, where the green juice of jungle cascades in torrent gushers and the earth that has built up over the submarine coral swings out of the sea into fold after fold of giant pleats, there are no years. Flame trees and scarlet creeper repeat sun-warnings. Birds rattle through vines as they rattled through pre-history, skimming the *nakamals* of hill villages, skimming Quiros's tatty camp at the Bay of the Two Saints, the new Jerusalem, skimming the sweating bodies of the sandalwood gatherers blackbirders missionaries. The islands hold stickily close to humid secrets where *man ples* remains paramount. Planters have come and gone, *rabis pipol*. The islands know. At last, at last, all will be driven out, *long wé, long wé*. There is this abrupt coming and the slower departing; but it will happen. (42)

This could be the vision of the cargo-cultist, but equally, it could belong to that other narrative voice of the book's opening. Home is in the heartland beyond all hope of a non-indigenous belonging. The beach, by contrast, is a zone that admits of no mastery, little permanency, less dignity. This is the site for a satirist's sojourn, but it is also where most of us live nowadays. The belittling of all its visible creatures and the longing for an impossible authenticity threatens to turn the novel into a scorning of the marginal and a legitimising of some central power, whether that is mystical nature or the political force of a government backed by foreign troops and aid.¹ Such an art perhaps is justified only in its subversive displacements or in its qualities of self-laceration.

In this curiously colonial and Romantic conception of primeval origins, Astley invests the true indigene with a unifying value that both validates and negates the touristic elements of her narrative, in that it acknowledges a heartland strangeness that must be but can never be possessed. Narota is successful only insofar as he approaches this inviolable source of island authenticity. It is his half-caste white side that leaves him open to manipulation and defeat. Though we have the story filtered through the drama of a mixed-race boy, and though we are obviously meant to sympathise with his quest to belong, we are equally directed to see him as having no place on the island. Everyone, from the most egregious colonial official to the beachcomber gone native, is "alien" (14), "jetsam" (66), "strangers" (94), "on the margins" (156). Gavi and his ilk must either attempt the impossible — identify wholly with indigenous tradition — or face inevitable expulsion. The mixed-race have no future; they too are "intruders" who are "nowhere" (10, 20, 23, 176), and they, to use Astley's persistent metaphors, will be sucked down by the currents, devoured by the sharks of history.

If we consider the dubious position of white Australia in the Pacific (its double role as colony and coloniser) and take into account the place of the author-tourist in relation to Vanuatu, the whole novel becomes a metaphor. Pacific Island experience is appropriated as a discussion of Australia's history of settlement. It is all a kind of comforting displacement for Astley's largely white Australian audience who can laugh at the European colonisers, appreciate the claims of the indigenous culture, but feel virtuously safe because they do not see themselves as half-caste, and refuse to see themselves as Lemmy Bonser. Conveniently peripheral to the action of the book, he is the only apparent connection to Australia (displaced by a generation and a black mother, but the archetypally crass 'ocker' opportunist, nonetheless); his very presence is a sign of our involvement. Astley has said, "I do like working with the idea of the misfit." She has also "defined the 'point' of all her books as 'self-delusion and the pity of self-delusion'" (Ross 264; Walker 18). Much of the creative tension in *Beachmasters* can be explained if we see the book as dramatising as well as exposing the necessary post-colonial delusions of belonging held by white Australians in the Pacific.

The positioning of the native world on Kristi reflects the ambivalence of White Australians to their Black predecessors and cohabitants. A 'naturalised' indigenous identity seems to stand in the book as an unscathed source of vitality and authority, but there are in fact very few natives in the book. This relative absence is characteristic of the tourist's outlook, in which natives form a kind of colourful backdrop against which encounters with the more accessible half-life of the coast (the 'tourist strip') take place. Insofar as the book is a discourse of Australianness, the absent presence (the speaking silence) of the native is a figure for the Aborigine's calling to account the marginal (coastal fringe-dwelling) white presence, and, indeed, calling into question the status of the novelist, who finally becomes a sojourner-cum-tourist in her own land. Astley epitomises the divisions in liberal-left white Australia when she combines support for an Australian republic (white decolonisation) with sympathy for Black liberation: "Morally, basically, I believe that 'colonized' places should be returned *in toto* to the original inhabitants. . . . Morally, of course, colonizers — invaders — should have no rights at all" (Baker 46).²

In terms of this reading, the figure of the half-caste (racial or cultural) is of major import because it lends authenticity, offers possibilities of belonging, to the white reader. It is the half-caste community, the beach-dwellers, who really act out the confusion of moral issues for the reader. Indeed, their ambiguity and the openness of the narrative are necessary as a source of comfort, because they leave room for a hope beyond the rather grim fate of exile, imprisonment, and dissolution within the rigid hierarchies of racial exclusiveness that represent, in a way, an inverted expression of colonialism (see Morse, Busia).

In Astley's work, the *hapkas* Gavi is innocent *and* guilty, the result of racial displacement (miscegenation by his grandfather). He gains wisdom in the pursuit of his 'native' uncle, but knows that his involvement in gun-running to support Narota's cause ends in the 'sacrifice' of the *yeremanu* and the death of Lorimer, the other figure of authenticity, the 'gone-native' old man. The *hapkas* innocent is essentially compromised. In the structures of colonialism he is both oppressor and oppressed, must be rejected, but cannot be wholly exterminated, because not wholly Other.

Gavi is both 'native' and 'tourist'; he must destroy himself as threatening/authentic challenger, and take on the guilt/act out the liberation and reabsorption of the tourist. The problematic complexity of this obligation implies either suicide or an avoidance of a simple violent resolution — simple displacement/deferral (Buzard 165, 167). On the one hand, the approval of the half-caste perpetuates white colonialism's validations of itself (the bushman/frontiersman as 'white native,' authentic inhabitant) just as the pathos attached to his fate in this book can be read as a post-colonial translation of older white records of pioneer suffering in exile. On the other, the recognition of a native half and the final dispossession of the half-caste are reminders of colonialist inauthenticity and the false consciousness of its self-pity. As a post-colonial, herself from a colonialist background, Astley is aware both that a romanticised view of the indigenous Other is no longer possible, and that there is a more problematic and intimate relationship which is easily distorted to hide ugly truths (see Williams). We have all been corrupted by history and there are no innocents — colonialists, tourists, or natives. Only the unattainable dreams of nature and pre-history provide unequivocal sources of authenticity.

Thus, *Beachmasters*, while it announces mastery and completion — of the colonists over the island, of Narota over the destiny of Kristi, of the Vila government over Narota, of the writer over technique — reveals its partial incompleteness, its lack of total closure of the circle. Vision is never total, always an assemblage of disparate views, as suggested in the repeated use of photographs/snapshots (3, 11). Lorimer, the oldest, most understanding, and most 'native' of the whites, concludes that there can be no connection between colonial and indigenous cultures save the one of "combustion engines and canned food" (149). His stoic statement in the diary rescued by Gavi takes on a double-edged quality that interrogates the function of the writer coming in to wrap up a slice of foreign life that may be her (our) own:

I must apologise. Long-learnt habits die hard.

I feel such an alien here. Such an outsider, still, having lived in these parts fifty years.

Why don't I go? It's like being in love. . . .

Trying to carve out a good sentence. There's little else to do. I might as well give myself up to that. (150)

Innovation and revolution both have to come from outside the local insular system; in coming, they disturb the balance and continuity of social patterns for all time. The same may be said of the writer's relation to her/his material. Writers and tourists themselves become ambiguous visitants, imposing order from outside — entering, withdrawing, and, by virtue of their fleeting presence, leaving things not quite as they were. The justification for this 'plunder' ultimately comes down to an aestheticist/existentialist goal of "trying to carve out a good sentence," but that reductive closure is also broken open by the material and meaning on which it is founded. White Australia has a literary and cultural tradition of dressing up its explorers. Here we have a novel that strips bare the figure of the compromised traveller in a post-colonial wasteland, while painting over it the gaudy disguise of the tourist-colonialist, which is also part of the historical picture.

NOTES

- ¹ Shirley Walker notes the ratifying of native authenticity in the correspondence of "Seaspeak" and "Rainspeak" with the vernacular of the book, and sees a conservative outlook in the author's use of old men as authority figures: "Astley is no anarchist. She reinforces the prejudices of the intelligentsia rather than challenging them" (19-20).
- ² Discussion of Aborigines and the white settlement of Australia is central to Astley's *The Kindness Cup* (1974) and forms part of her most recent book, *It's Raining in Mango* (1987).

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