

Voss and the Ordinariness of Whiteness

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Abstract: This paper argues that the historical and discursive link between ordinariness and patriarchal whiteness has been finely explored by Patrick White in the novel, *Voss* (1957), which stands as a critique of the hegemonic effects of white affect in its engagement with the experiential diversity of the everyday.

Keywords: *Voss*; affect; patriarchal Whiteness; ordinariness; universality

‘Ordinary’ Australia is what enables – legislatively, culturally and spatially – the exercise of vernacular violence. It is the very vernacularity of this violence, its very ‘ordinariness’, that enables it to occlude its everyday production of violence...
(Pugliese 47)

Introduction

Julia Gillard cuddling carefully selected white babies in the opening days of the 2010 election campaign. Laura Trevelyan, the female protagonist of Patrick White’s novel, *Voss* (1957), waiting for the enigmatic German explorer to return. These two images are connected by their representation of the Australian hegemonization of patriarchal whiteness as the universal form of the twentieth century “ordinary man”, i.e. of the emergence of a “multitude of quantified heroes who lose names and faces as they become the river of streets, a mobile language of computations and rationalities that belong to no one” (De Certeau I). Their affective intensity and resonance moves across the porous surfaces of the corporeal and incorporeal, and it is not particularly forceful as it travels within the subtlest and unnoticed surfaces of contact of everyday life. Nevertheless the images of these two women convey a disruptive, yet also comforting, passage of affective intensity, as they increase but also set a limit to the worry of ‘ordinary’ Australians for the future and reproduction of the White Nation. The white political contract with the ‘ordinary man’ of the twentieth century was arguably secured

through the investment in affect: white power aimed at modulating the circulation and distribution of worry and fear, not in order to prevent and prescribe them but by “intensifying, multiplying, and saturating the material-affective processes through which bodies come in and out of formation” (Anderson 162). In this manner, the symbolic images of Laura Trevelyan and Julia Gillard may be read as an example of how the fantasy of patriarchal whiteness is connected to the affective state of paranoia – a perception of white injury where “worrying” becomes the dominant affective mode of expressing one’s attachment to the nation:

They are constantly finding a source of concern: look at how many migrants there are, look at crime, look at ghettos, look at tourists. Such pathological worry is that of people who use worrying to try to construct themselves as the most worthy Australians in the land. It should be remembered, however, that worrying can be the last resort of the weak. There are many people for whom worrying is the last available strategy for staying in control of social processes over which they have no longer much control. (Hage 10)

The normative force of patriarchal whiteness, the latter featuring mostly as an unmarked category that unifies the nation through its colonization of the mainstream, has been cleared by a long line of Prime Ministers and more recently by John Howard’s political discourse of anxiety and fear of dispossession. In Aileen Moreton-Robinson words,

As a regime of power, patriarchal white sovereignty operates to reproduce and maintain its investment in the nation as a white possession... Indigenous sovereignty is perceived to be foreclosed by this assumption, and its existence is both refused and acknowledged through an anxiety of dispossession, which rises to the surface when the nation as a white possession is perceived to be threatened. (Moreton-Robinson 2007 87-88)

Yet the Robert Menzies era, during which Patrick White was writing *Voss*, arguably naturalized patriarchal whiteness as the familiar, ordinary and domestic backbone of the Australian nation, as becomes blatant in his famous speech “The Forgotten People”,

I do not believe that the real life of this nation is to be found either in great luxury hotels and the petty gossip of so-called fashionable suburbs, or in the officialdom of the organised masses. It is to be found in the homes of people who are nameless and unadvertised, and who, whatever their individual religious conviction or dogma, see in their children their greatest contribution to the immortality of their race. The home is the foundation of sanity and sobriety; it is the indispensable condition of continuity; its health determines the health of society as a whole. (22 May 1942)

Thus *Voss* may be re-read as White’s representation of the universalization of whiteness. Nonetheless the identification of the particular content of universality in a specific epoch does not account for the enigmatic emergence of the space of universality itself. The crucial question of how “abstract universality itself becomes a

‘fact of (social) life’ may remain unsolved (Žižek 104). It is the contention of this article that social life, as the contingent space of universality, is precisely what is targeted, intensified and modulated by white patriarchal power – a form of power that arguably functions through an excess of affect that saturates and forms everyday life, and at the same time passes from “body to body (human, non-human, part-body, and otherwise) in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds” (Gregg and Seigworth 1).

White worry returned to take centre stage during the 2010 Labour election campaign and carried a particular ideological charge in light of Julia Gillard’s engagement in the population debate, a debate which conflated environmental sustainability, overcrowding, failing infrastructures and the arrival of asylum-seekers.¹ As Suvendrini Perera aptly noted in *The Age*, “the Prime Minister is not only the first woman to hold the position, but one who is unmarried, in a *de facto* heterosexual relationship, and childless by choice... Yet her campaign has seen the wide circulation of Gillard cuddling white babies, together with her comments on the necessity of the ‘right kinds of immigrants’ and ‘a sustainable Australia’” (30 July, 2010). Thus, the images of Julia Gillard stage a complex conflict lying at the basis of the White Nation’s subject formation. The images exceed the interpellation of patriarchal whiteness as they highlight Julia Gillard’s refusal to reproduce and marry, and can not be directly assimilated into the terms of the social limits of white ordinariness as they reveal the workings of its struggle for hegemony. Nevertheless her images come forward as an effort to set a psychic limit to the “traumatic rupture” of the white subject from the white patriarchal symbolic order through the sublimation of an affective investment in anxiety, worrying and fear (Butler 141).

Likewise, Patrick White’s novel, *Voss* (1957), is a work of finely observed aspects of Australian Victorian society which records how whiteness became the ordinary measure of universal humanity in Australia, and at the same time traces the fear and desire rippling on the surface of the 1950s’ everyday life. While whiteness in the 1950s figured mostly as an unmarked category which unified the Australian nation through its colonization of the everyday, writing about the representation of whiteness in *Voss* may be difficult because scholarship on White’s novels has often concentrated on non-dominant subjects, reproducing the oddness, differentness, exceptionality of these subjects while, to borrow Richard Dyer’s famous definition of whiteness, “the norm has carried on as if is the natural, inevitable, ordinary way of being human”(45). Yet White’s hyperbolic reiteration of whiteness may be a key to the understanding of the historical universalization of the link between the bare definition of ordinary humanity and patriarchal whiteness. *Voss* casts a retrospective gaze on exploratory expeditions to explain how specific white virtues that have an affective basis (such as fraternity, glory, and humility), and white affects such as worry and fear were modulated and reinforced during settler colonial enterprises to create a state of total mobilization. Settler colonialism, as in World War Two’s state of “total war” which was still vivid in White’s mind,² involved an expansion of the front line and the total mobilization of citizens though the modulation of morale (Anderson 169). As this article hopes to demonstrate, the virtual dimension of settler colonialism’s total mobilization is most

clearly exemplified by Voss's and Laura's interconnected psychic journeys as paradigms of the ordinary and extraordinary, the domestic and front line, folding into each other. Voss's and Laura's counterpunctual journeys are held together by the promotion and modulation of white affect and the need to reorganize sensations and instincts in colonial forms of governance. Nevertheless, affect may also escape the "micro-fascism of everyday life" (Bertelsen and Murphie 148) and the circulation of affect in the novel, its moments of expansion, rupture and instances of discontinuity, may be read as White's recording of the power and limits of the white patriarchal order as it bears "witness to the psychic, bodily and discursive everyday imbrication of whiteness" (Brewster).

Surfaces, Taxonomies, and the Universalization of Whiteness

Close reading of *Voss* reveals a hyperbolic accumulation of details referring to the epidermis. As Brigid Rooney has recently remarked, "It is White's habit [...] to attend to the discomforts of the skin, to focus on the bodily surface of characters [...] surfaces paradoxically become sites of intensity and feeling, and this does the work of affective and social excavation" (15). In *Voss*, racial naming stages the process through which "the marriage of linguistic hegemony and racial marginalization [...] came to be fundamental to imperial discourse" (Ashcroft 312) during the nineteenth century,

Colour had become the unquestioned sign of the relation between external characteristics and inner capacities, despite its complete metaphoricity, arbitrariness and unreliability in describing those external features. It is in the use of colour terms that the dominance of linguistic tradition over observation comes into play. For the colour terms – "black", "white", "yellow", "red" – by which racial typology was organized, bear no relation to anything in reality. They are an elaboration of the "fictionality" of language itself, the arbitrary link between signifier and signified. But the experience of race, the "fact of blackness" as Frantz Fanon put it, is no less real for its empirical fictionality. [...] Those signifiers have had an indisputable function in colonial relations and have been notoriously difficult to dislodge. But the paradox of race is that the reality of racial experience centres, not in physical typology, or "community of blood" or genetic variation, but in language. (Ashcroft 2001a 312)

White's insistence on colour terms highlights how the "metaphoricity, arbitrariness and unreliability" of racial definitions acquires force and stability in the settler colony by becoming an interrelated and shifting system of linguistic, social and affective markers (Chambers). He arguably dwells on the bodily surface of characters in order to create a carefully constructed, yet shifting and mobile, racial taxonomy which indexes the social status of characters in the newly established Colony of *Voss*. Thus, the Colonel, who represents the Governor and his authority, has a "fleshless face, which was of a rich purple where the hair allowed it to appear" and is accompanied by a young anonymous Lieutenant of "sterling origins and pink skin, that apologized at every pore" (113). While the transported maid, Rose Portion, is brown (159), Belle Bonner, the heiress to the Bonners' property, is honey-coloured and will pass this "characteristic, together

with an excellent constitution, on to her many descendants, for the creation of whom she had been purposely designed” (18). Belle Bonner’s honey-coloured skin signifies her social position and the certainty that she will maintain the social structure of privilege of whiteness but, as White notes later, the privilege of whiteness is not related to colour at all, since “Belle’s skin was permitted to be golden while others went protecting their pink and white. At close quarters, changed back from goddess into animal, there were little, fine golden hairs on what some dared to refer to as *Belle Bonner’s brown complexion*” (323).

Elsewhere, White emphasizes that the social arrogance of whiteness in the settler colony is closely tied to ownership and property as in the case of the station owner, Mr Boyle, who “was of a reddish, chestnut colour, intensified by the evening sun [...] As he advanced erect, moving in the saddle just enough to emphasize the arrogance of ownership” (165). Hence, the patriarchal white economy is arguably part of the settler colony’s possessive investment in a modern economy where the generation, circulation, and operationalization of white capital and property organizes and reproduces social inclusion/exclusion. As George Lipsitz contends, the possessive investment in whiteness does have material effects on a socioeconomic level (3). Whiteness is, of course, a figment of the imagination, however the possessive investment in whiteness provides property, power, and opportunities, such as insider networks that channel employment, housing secured through discriminatory markets, and better education opportunities, to those who introvert and pass on the spoils of discrimination (Lipsitz vii).

White ironically represents the arbitrary and unstable or phantasmatic nature of whiteness, and often highlights that the masculine work ethic of settler colonialism requires a certain degree of tanning, as in the case of Harry Robarts, who “was weak in wit but did enjoy certain other advantages. And muscular strength too. He was white-skinned but heavy-shouldered” (32); and, due to his instrumental work as an ornithologist of the colonial enterprise, Palfreyman’s “face of which the skin normally was burnt to the yellow-brown that colourless faces acquire in the sun, had been drained by his recent illness to a greenish white” (45). Conversely, Top, the music master, who “was comparatively silent and unprolific. He was a small, white, worried man, with small moist, white hands, shameful in that country of dry, yellow callouses” (30). As the wealthy grazier, Mr Anderson, recounts, being suntanned in the new colony indicates a “working towards” belonging (Roediger), “since they arrived there on bullock wagons, with all their possessions and their white skins, and were at first burnt, then blistered, then calloused, but above all, grappled forever to their land by the strong habits of everyday life that they formed upon it” (135). In this light, all the companions of the expedition are blemished for they are new immigrants but may potentially enter the settler white order through an ability to naturalize as the ordinary people of the “Great Australian Emptiness, in which the mind is the least of possessions, in which the rich man is the important man, [...] muscles prevail, and the march of material ugliness does not raise a quiver from the average nerves” (White 1958: 39).

White’s hyperbolic representation of how whiteness has secured its connections to privilege and property reveals how the arbitrariness of race has been dislodged through

the social affirmation of white “complicity” (Probyn-Rapsey). Skin in *Voss* is an indication of a character’s power to affect and be affected. The settler colony’s white order is established through an ever-gathering accretion of force-relations. Whiteness “accumulates across both relatedness and interruptions in relatedness, becoming a palimpsest of force-encounters traversing the ebbs and swells of intensities that pass between ‘bodies’ (bodies defined not by an outer skin-envelope or other surface boundary but by their potential to reciprocate or co-participate in the passages of affect)” (Gregg and Seigworth 2). The establishment of an affective solidarity and commonality based on whiteness is frequent in White’s depiction of his characters’ point of view. Skin and touch create solidarity among the members of the expedition as when Harry Robarts “would have liked to touch his saviour’s skin. Once or twice he had touched Voss, and it had gone unnoticed” (38). Or in the case of Palfreyman, who “looking into the open pores of the man’s skin, wished that all difficulties might wear the complexion of this simple sailor” (98). At the same time, skin often anticipates a character’s difficulty in reciprocating, as in the case of Frank Le Mesurier who “did not communicate at once. His skin was yellowish [...] His own skin was repulsive to him” (33, 37). And the companions’ perception of the potentially disrupting presence of Laura Trevelyan is indicated by her skin which also constitutes an affective relational surface: “the men were frowning at her as they picked at warts on their skins. They were unsuspectingly afraid of what they could not touch” (101) and “this girl had all the cold confidence of her rather waxy skin. She would not speak easily, as ladies were taught in all circumstances to do. The stiff panels of her black habit were boarding her up” (101).

White’s representation of whiteness is characterised by an open-ended, perpetual becoming, pulled beyond its seeming surface-boundedness by way of its relation to, and composition through, affect’s forces of encounter and solidarity. Thus, it is characterised by affective movements across and within states of white embodiment. Voss, the German explorer, begins by being the symbol of the perpetual foreigner who does not abide by the economic and social contract of the white nation (Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos 32), and is later represented as the character who is most in tune with the ‘sunburnt country’. He exemplifies the settlers’ various attempts to appropriate, incorporate and capture Indigenous cultures in fiction as part of a wide range of forms of “indigenization”, a term coined by Goldie to suggest “the impossible necessity of becoming indigenous” (Goldie 13, 15). The only character who believes in the superior qualities of Aboriginal people, slowly surrendering to their superiority as he drives the exploration party closer to death in the dark centre of Australia, he will become “blackened and yellowed by the sun, dried in the wind, he now resembled some root, of dark and esoteric purpose” (168).

The colonial will, as the “esoteric” drive to be admitted into the “inner” circle of those who belong, will be the driving force of white trauma as Voss thus encourages the intolerable blurring of colour and human/non-human divisions: “Now there was little distinction between skins, between men and horses even” (366). Race becomes an entire, vital and modulating field of myriad becomings across the human and non-human. This is most evident in White’s careful construction of another recurring taxonomy in the novel, that of animality. His insistence on animality exhibits with a

remarkable economy the set of specific differences that constituted whiteness as an ontological as well as an epistemological category of humanity in the nineteenth century. Animality is commented upon by White with the characteristic wry humour of his authorial intrusions, as when Harry Robarts is astonished at the sight of Frank Le Mesurier's blood ("It had not occurred to him that a gentleman might lie in real blood, like an animal") (381). Conversely, some characters inhabit a liminal human-animal space. Rose Portion, the deported maid, lies "upon the floor, half in the dining-room, half in the passage to the pantry [...]" and mumbles like an "animal, biting her harelip" (50-51), while Harry Robarts, Voss's penniless servant, "has an animal nature" (96) and the wife of the ex-convict Judd's, has "animal-like eyes". In this continuum, Aboriginal peoples occupy a heightened stereotypical position since "like all Aboriginals will turn into lizards" (169) and possess animal senses.

Hence, interpreting the novel's dwelling on skin and animality as White's hyperbolic registration of the social and affective organization of whiteness arguably confirms recent readings of his modernist depiction of the ordinary and the surface of everyday life as the affective site of the extra-ordinary (cf. Rooney 16, Brennan 21-22). In *Voss* the ordinary often yields to the universal, and most importantly to the universalization of the link between whiteness and humanity. As Etienne Balibar writes in "Racism as Universalism", every universalism, or at least every humanist universalism is forced to undertake "A definition of the human species or simply the human that leads to an infinite process of demarcation between the human, the more than human and the less than human and the reflection of these two limits within the imaginary boundaries of the human 'species'" (286). The shifting and expanding demarcation of the human and non-human, of the more than human and the less than human, endlessly repeats itself in the novel, thus emerging as the moment in which the human is haunted by the universalization of whiteness. The same Voss who, according to Cynthia Vanden Driesen's (2009) recent reading, strives to restore in his Aboriginal guides, Dugald and Jackie, the proper human status, champions a universalist humanism. By doing this, he is the bearer of the cause of the universal against the contingent and of the identical against the different. The apparently different must be restored to the identical.³

The paradox, as Warren Montag points out in "The Universalization of Whiteness", is that universal humanism is one of the forms in which whiteness first appeared. In this way, the perception of whiteness as ordinary is deprived of its purely imaginary character at the moment of its universalization. Voss, then, will become part of the country which he owns "by right of vision" and of which "he had become possessed by implicit right" (27-29). He will appropriate Indigenous sovereignty, as in the powerful image in which Voss rides forward with the two mute Indigenous guides, and in this "way is strengthened by his visions of uninterrupted space" (189). In this manner, White recounts how whiteness became the invisible measure of being human in the nineteenth century and of the right to sovereignty through a defamiliarisation of the myth of the first explorers. As Aileen Moreton-Robinson notes,

In the guise of the invisible human universal, whiteness secures hegemony through discourse by normalising itself as the cultural space of the West.

[...] It would be a mistake, however, to assume that whiteness is only found in societies inhabited and dominated by white people or that it functions only where white bodies exist. Whiteness is not about bodies and skin colour; instead, it is more about the discursive practices that, because of colonialism and neo-colonialism, privilege and sustain global dominance of white imperial subjects. [...] The discursive formation of whiteness [in Australia] is a relatively uncharted territory that has remained invisible, dominant and pervasive, even as it influences everyday life. ([1999] 2003 78)

White Sovereignty and the Complicity of the White Patriarchal Household

White arguably represents how the settlers' imaginary ownership of Australian space was achieved through a possessive investment in whiteness (Lipsitz). The pioneer myth was established through the reification of an intimate relationship between the new settlers and the country, which sought to ignore the pre-existent relationship of Indigenous Australian peoples with Australian space. As Paul Carter has famously noted, self-deception was central to the mapping of Australia as the settlers' linguistic economy of possessive representation was masked as "the language of [geographic] description". Representing the Australian continent as a silent space, travellers and explorers of the eighteenth and nineteenth century's colonial project claimed that it was their scientific duty to name the Australian continent's "trackless wilderness". Yet, as Carter further explains, the sovereign act of naming the places they encountered was not related to "nature at all. It is [related to] language and the impossibility of distinguishing the language of feeling from the language of description" (Carter 42-46). White represents the mapping activity of the nineteenth century explorers, indicating how the metaphoric rift between Anglophone maps and place was first overcome by explorers through the collapsing of the referential and affective functions of naming. The language of the wealthy merchant, Mr Bonner, whose trading in "Irish linens and Swiss muslins, damask, and [...] India Twills" demonstrates the worldly colonialism of Australian settlers, conveys emotion and feeling rather than geographic information, revealing the "white possessive investment" lying behind his sponsoring of Voss's romantic exploration of the continent (Lipsitz). Moreover, White demonstrates through meta-literary reflection how the mapping of the young explorer, Voss, may be romanticised but it also results in the merging of the informative and affective functions of language (Besnier). Voss, who will fill in the blanks of the map with European presence, 'feels' the place lying within geographic descriptions,

With the elegant but strong paper-knife he began to tap a strip of canvas he had unfolded on the scented leather on his desk.

'I expect you will consider it imprudent, Mr Voss, if I ask whether you have studied the map?'

Here, indeed, was a map of a kind, presumptuous where it was not a blank.

'The map?' said Voss...

'The map?' repeated the German. 'I will first make it' [...]

'It is good to have a good opinion', laughed the merchant. His honest flesh heaved, and himself rather drunken, began to read off his document, to

chant almost, to invoke the first recorded names, the fly-spots of human settlement, the legend of rivers.

Mr Bonner read the words, but Voss saw the rivers. He followed them in their fretful course. He flowed in cold glass, or dried up in little yellow pot-holes, festering with green scum. (23)

Driven by the desire to make the country more like home, early settlers and explorers sought to neutralize the “environment’s power to alienate” and tried to transform the physical appearance of the country through mapping, architecture and botanical enterprises (Collingwood-Whittick xviii). As Bill Ashcroft contends, colonial social practice involved a metonymic relation with the social organization of “habitation” (2001b, 134). In this light, the widely commented upon spiritual and transcendental interconnection of Voss’s and Laura’s journeys⁴ may acquire a new interpretation according to which the former’s journey towards white sovereignty and spiritual belonging to place is made possible by the contrapuntal complicity of the white patriarchal household – one can not exist without the other, the universalization of white sovereignty lying on the bedrock of the ordinary and everyday.⁵

The celebration of the Empire’s grandness and of the historical importance of exploratory expeditions in the establishment of settler sovereignty opens the fifth chapter with a melancholic description of the contingent, nonetheless choral, participation of humanity in the sailing of the Osprey, the triumphant ship of Voss’s Great Expedition,

So there was a quiet conviction of preparation in the lovely morning, although at sight of green water lolling round the sides of ships and little blunt boats, all belief in oceans should have been suspended. Life was grown humane [...] Houses were honester, more genial, it seemed, in the crude attempt to fulfil their purpose. Then there was the long lean ship, smelling of fresh tar, of hemp, of salt, and a cargo of seed potatoes with the earth still on them. This ship that would carry the party on the first and gentle lap of their immense journey, and which had been evolved by some most happy conjunction of art and science, could never have known conflict of canvas, or so it appeared. (93)

The chapter is pervaded by the melancholic rhetoric of the nineteenth century’s universal claims of white temporality, including a cameo describing two Indigenous women and their children which exploits the widespread mood of white anthropological descriptions of Indigenous peoples inaugurated in the nineteenth century and still current at the time of White’s writing (Russo 81-100). Yet although White was inspired by Ludwig Leichhardt’s *Journal of an Overland Expedition in Australia from Moreton Bay to Port Essington*, written during the years 1813-1848, and by Edward John Eyre’s *Journals of Expeditions of Discovery into Central Australia and Overland From Adelaide to King George’s Sounds in the years 1840-1841*,⁶ his representation of Voss’s journey responds to the impulse of a different life from that of the widespread glorification of the first explorers and pioneers. White epitomizes the process of

reification of what might be identified as the predominant mood of the Australian society of the twentieth century: the imagined melancholia or nostalgia for the Australian pioneer and explorer myths. Nostalgia is a form of melancholia based on disavowal and in psychoanalytic terms it is similar to fetishism as it is based on the 'displacement' of what is missed onto another focus of attention (Khanna). In these terms, nostalgia is one of the predominant affects of Australian colonialism which, during the twentieth century, diverted its attention from inassimilable Indigenous sovereignty to the discursive reification of white nostalgia. Borrowing from Paul Gilroy's work, it may be claimed that in *Voss* white nostalgia signifies the deep change in circumstances and moods that followed the end of Empire and the consequent loss of imperial prestige (Gilroy 90). The total mobilization of settler colonialism through nostalgia is exemplified by the sailing of the *Osprey*, which is fiercely represented by White through the trivial chattering of Mrs Bonner, who describes it as "an event of national significance" (78). Nevertheless retrospective close reading of all the authorial interventions regarding the Expedition disclose an 'ironic' strategy of representation as they anticipate that it will bring none of its explorers back. White's retrospective representation of the Australian society of the 1840s-1850s alerts readers to its nostalgic mood, using irony to sharpen and highlight the discordant features of the settler myth in the light of later developments.

Most revealingly, Laura Trevelyan's initial threat to the circle of "complicity" and solidarity of whiteness in the construction of the Australian settler colonial state first appears in the closing scene of the fifth chapter when Belle and Laura witness the sailing of the *Osprey* (Probyn-Rapsey 220). The sailing of the *Osprey* brings Belle and Laura to a fit of melancholy, melancholy representing their participation in the "quiet conviction of preparation" of the White Nation. Belle is both afraid and filled with a desire to understand, but, quite revealingly, Laura does not offer her solidarity to her cousin,

Wind and sea were tossing the slow ship. Gusts of that same winds, now fresh, now warm, troubled the garden, and carried the scents of pine and jasmine into the long balcony. The two young women could not have told whether they were quickened or drugged, until a kind of feverish melancholy began to take possession of them. Their bodies shivered in their thin gowns; their minds were exposed to the keenest barbs of thought; and the whole scene that their vision embraced became distinct and dancing, beautiful but sad. [...]

Then Belle, who was finally overwhelmed by the moist, windblown afternoon, began to be afraid.

'Laura', she said, very quietly.

She was as determined to press against her cousin, as the latter was to hold her off.

But Belle could not bear it. 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.

'Laura', she asked, 'what has come over us? What is happening?'

She was crying, and pressing herself against the mysterious body of her cousin.

'It is nothing. It is you who imagine', said Laura, resisting with her voice, with all her might. Persistent touch was terrifying to her... Her hot tears shocked the other's colder skin" (122).

Laura's disruption of the white patriarchal symbolic order is signalled by her resistance to touch and by her cold skin, which, as aforementioned, are two recurrent affective surfaces of the novel's representation of the complicity of social whiteness. This dialogue is central since the novel will close with the emblematic stories of Belle, who participates in the reproduction of white patriarchy, and Laura whose belonging to the country of whiteness is partly foreclosed by her economic condition. Laura threatens the newly established white patriarchal world order as she refuses to conform to the patriarchal economy of whiteness by refusing to marry for interest and adopting the daughter of her dead deported maid, Rose Portion. All the same, she will ultimately not fail to participate in the White Nation's project. This becomes clear when she communicates her decision to become the head of a school for the highly educated daughters of settlers to her distressed and surprised uncle and aunt, Mr and Mrs Bonner, who fear their white status will be blemished by their niece's decision,

'It is the kind of step a distressed gentlewoman is forced into taking', she felt compelled to say, 'or some poor immigrant girl without connexions in the Colony'. [...] 'It is surprising that you have never contemplated matrimony, Laura. There is many a young fellow in the country would jump at the opportunity of union with such a respectable firm'.

'I do not doubt it', said Laura, 'but I would not care to be the reason for anybody's marrying a store'.

'It would be in the nature of a double investment', the uncle answered gallantly. [...]

'Why should I not exercise my wits? They are all I brought into the country when I came here a poor immigrant. Yes, Uncle, your kindness apart, that is all I was. And now it is my hope to give the country something in return'.

[...]

'The country', Mr Bonner began, 'I am always the first to do my duty by the country'.

'Indeed', said Mrs Bonner, 'we are all a sacrifice to that, what with the servant question, and the climate, which is so ruinous to anyone's complexion. (402-403)

Thus, while Laura Trevelyan threatens the White Nation's patriarchal economy, she also feeds and acknowledges the worry and concern of ordinary Australians and in doing so she ultimately does not fail to confirm white subjectivity. She represents a response to white trauma and the possessive investment in affects such as worry, concern and anxiety, which are all part of the White Nation's projection into the future (Ngai).

Laura Trevelyan, the niece of the wealthy merchant Mr Bonner, is the quasi transcendental and unruly counterpart of the ordinary and naturalized white patriarchal order embodied by her aunt Mrs Bonner and her cousin Belle Bonner. Yet she is also the agent of the confirmation of the White Nation's symbolic and social order through 'traumatic rupture'. As Slavoj Žižek argues in *Contingency, Hegemony and Universality*, subject-formation through traumatic inauguration and as the constitutive rupture of social reality may be considered as prior to any social and historical reality (90-135). However as Judith Butler notes in her response to Žižek, the latter's Lacanian articulation of the relationship between the psychic and the social is based on a very specific theory of sociality that understands the symbolic order as a social contract. The 'quasi transcendental' status of sexual difference in Žižek presumes a sociality based on fictive and idealized kinship positions that takes for granted the heterosexual family as constituting the defining social bond for all humans. Thus, as Butler notes, sexual difference, and I would add white sexual difference, is never outside the struggle for hegemony (136-181). Extending Butler's considerations further, if white worry and fear are the symptom of the primary rupture of subjectivity that inaugurates and destabilizes social reality and the domain of sociality itself, White arguably represents this rupture in terms of nostalgia for a white heterosexual presumption about sociality and the symbolic order, and a state of anxiety for the future and reproduction of the White Nation.

Consequently, White's critique of Australian ordinariness is timely as it "has much to say about the national, and international climate of fear that is being fuelled by false assertions about the threat difference poses to 'ordinary' citizens and their way of life" (Brennan 24, 27-28).⁷ However White also effectively recounts for readers how white anxiety, worry and fear have emerged as a diffuse potentiality to be secured as part of a broad expansion of politics to include affect. While the turn to affect in Australian whiteness studies may provide a way of understanding and engaging with a set of broader changes in white societal (re)production in the context of mutations of the end of the empire (the changes include the emergence and consolidation of biopolitical forms of power that invest in the production and modulation of life itself), the Australian cultural debate has generally failed to take into account the background of patriarchal white economy that makes the White Nation possible through the hegemonization of the ordinary. Although the population debate has been seen as a defining factor of the 2010 campaign, it is obviously misleading to believe that it has been the first time. Politicians and babies often recur in Australian elections as they evoke the well-known trope of Australia as a young nation, but also of women's bodies as a fertile terrain for claiming possession over the future of the nation, thus reinforcing the White Nation's frontiers and multiplying its internal and external biopolitical border controls. This ideological fantasy may be fully grasped in Patrick White's novel, *Voss* (1957), which may be read as a reflection on the fundamental and constitutive ways in which the white patriarchal economy has become the ordinary and universal foundation of the White Nation by obscuring its historically contingent origins.

Notes

1. See Lars Jensen's tracing of the historical genealogy of the Population Debate in this issue.
2. Graham Huggan compares Voss to Hitler and notes that, in *Voss*, "colonialism/imperialism and Nazism coalesce in the absolute figure of pure whiteness" (86).
3. Today and in the last two hundred years of co-habitation, there have been many cases in which familiarity and fascination for Indigenous peoples have shaped Indigenous/non-Indigenous relationships contradictorily, ambivalently and at times positively. Hence, a possessive investment in whiteness is revealed, with some notable exceptions, by the representation of Indigenous Australian peoples, which over the last 150 years has been based on largely unbroken visual conventions. As George Lipsitz puts it, "the frequent invocation of people of color as sources of inspiration or forgiveness for whites, and the white fascination with certain notions of primitive 'authenticity' among communities of color, all testify to the white investment in images that whites themselves have created"(118). These emotions and acts form the central force in the dynamics of white desire manifested in the creation of a literary imagination of the past. Thus, I believe that White's representation of Dugald and Jackie in *Voss* is a hyperbolic exercise in "Aboriginality", which has been termed by Marcia Langton as the genealogy of the "colonial relation to itself" and the technical forms it has assumed (1993).
4. In "The Prodigal Son", White notes that in writing *The Tree of Man* and *Voss*, "It was the exaltation of the 'average' that made me panic the most, and in this frame of mind, in spite of myself, I began to conceive another novel [...] I wanted to try to suggest in this book every possible aspect of life, through the life of an ordinary man and woman. But at the same time I wanted to discover the extraordinary behind the ordinary, the mystery and the poetry which alone could make bearable the lives of such people [...]" (1958 39).
5. On the sacred in Patrick White see Ashcroft "The Presence of the Sacred in Patrick White" (2010) and Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass and McCredden *Intimate Horizons* (2009).
6. For a detailed comparative study of *Voss* and Leichhardt's and Eyre's journals see (vanden) Driesen (29-77)
7. See further Burrows, J.F. "Archetypes and Stereotypes: *Riders in the Chariot*". *Southerly* 25.1 (1965): 47-68; During, Simon. *Patrick White*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1996.; McCann, Andrew. "The Politics of Abjection: Patrick White's *Riders in the Chariot*". *Australian Literary Studies* 18.2, 1997: 145-155. Wilding, Michael. "The Politics of Modernism". *Prophet from the Desert: Critical essays on Patrick White*. Ed. John McLaren & Mary Ellen Ryan. Melbourne: Red Hill, 1995, 24-33.

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