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Remapping *Capricornia*: Xavier Herbert's Cosmopolitan Imagination

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Abstract

Since its publication in 1938 critics have generally read Xavier Herbert's *Capricornia* as a nationalist novel, even when its nationalism is seen to be structured by contradiction. But little attention has been given to the ways in which Herbert's complex, multifarious and heteroglossic novel exceeds and challenges the very possibility of coherent national space and a coherent national story. This essay considers moments and spaces in Herbert's novel where the national is displaced and unravelled. Drawing on Rebecca Walkowitz's idea of cosmopolitan style and Suvendrini Perera's work on Australia's insular imagination I identify a critical cosmopolitanism that inheres in the novel's geographical imagination and its literary form, particularly the narrative voice which retains a critical distance from the nationalist sensibility of various characters and plot lines, performing a detached and restless homelessness that I identify with the cosmopolitan. Ultimately, I ask how the novel's spatial and environmental imagination displaces its nationalist agenda, making space for a different kind of social imagination—one that does not confine itself to the terms of the nation or organise itself around a central figure for the nation.

Keywords

Xavier Herbert; cosmopolitanism; Australian literature

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When Xavier Herbert's *Capricornia* was published in 1938 it was hailed by critics as the 'Great Australian Novel' and it went on to win the Sesquicentenary Prize for Fiction that year. More recently, several critics have considered the way Herbert's first novel reconciles a strident nationalism with its fierce critique of the greed and racism that undergirds Australian history and culture.[1] These readings, however, maintain the assumption that *Capricornia* is, at its core, a nationalist novel, albeit one which pours its energies into the redemptive national potential of a hybrid European-Aboriginal culture. But less attention has been given to the way that Herbert's complex, multifarious and heteroglossic novel exceeds and challenges the very possibility of coherent national space and a coherent national story.

This essay considers moments and spaces in Herbert's novel where the national is displaced and unravelled. Rather than a rebuttal of the tradition of reading Capricornia as nationalist fiction it should be taken as something of a thought experiment. Capricornia undoubtedly is a nationalist novel and Herbert certainly had a nationalist agenda (albeit an eccentric and incoherent one). Nonetheless I want to give a reading of the novel that displaces the nation or Australia as the central term and also suggest that the novel itself performs precisely this displacement. The point here will not be to argue that there is no nationalist agenda in *Capricornia* but rather to see how this big, sprawling and contradictory novel might help us to think and to see something beyond the nation.

I demonstrate this displacement operating in two main ways. First, I suggest that it takes place through the novel's geographical (spatial and environmental) imagination, which despite the novel's positioning at its time of publication as 'Brilliantly Australian' and 'the novel of the Spirit of the Land' is not strictly national but perhaps more accurately regional, stretching from Capricornia (Herbert's name for the region around Darwin) to the East Indies and the Philippines as well as to China and Japan.[2] Furthermore, the novel demonstrates the way shifting tides and river levels in the sea country of Northern Australia pose a challenge to the fantasy of a bounded, insular and mappable national space. Here I draw particularly on Suvendrini Perera's work on the way fantasies of insularity shape the Australian nationalist imagination.[3] The central question I ask is: how does the novel's spatial and environmental imagination displace its nationalist agenda and make space for a different kind of social imagination—one which does not confine itself to the terms of the nation or organise itself around a central figure for the nation?

Second, I suggest this displacement is achieved through the novel's narrative voice, which shifts restlessly from one perspective to another across a broad, extensive, multiethnic and transnational cast of characters. The narrative voice retains an ironic distance from the novel's cast, including the two protagonists, and rarely identifies with any single character or position. I read this refusal to settle on any perspective as a detached and restless homelessness, which I identify with the cosmopolitan. In this I suggest that we should identify the novel's cosmopolitan sensibility not so much in its content (which draws on many of the familiar tropes of Australian nationalist literature), but rather in its form and style which retains a questioning and ironic detachment from the nationalist perspective some of its characters espouse and embody. This argument is indebted to Rebecca Walkowitz's notion of cosmopolitan style, which identifies a tradition of critical cosmopolitanism that is linked to innovations in modernist form in twentieth-century British writing. Walkowitz argues that these writers use features of modernist narrative to develop a critical cosmopolitanism that involves 'thinking beyond the nation but also comparing, distinguishing, and judging among different versions of transnational thought; testing moral and political norms, including the norms of critical thinking; and valuing informal as well as transient models of community'.[4]

Significantly, Walkowitz's understanding of critical cosmopolitanism doesn't necessarily involve a rejection of local or even, at times, national attachments but rather 'trouble[s] the distinction between local and global'.[5] Although of the same historical period that is the focus of Walkowitz's study, an Australian novel like *Capricornia* sits outside the tradition of writing she identifies; hers is a theory drawing on Raymond William's idea of 'metropolitan perception' as a response to the conditions of the imperial metropolis.[6] Nonetheless, I adopt Walkowitz's emphasis on the way cosmopolitanism might inhere in a posture, style or ethos that is carried by literary form. I would suggest also placing Herbert's *Capricornia* in this tradition contributes to the ongoing work of trying to globalise our understanding of modernism by thinking modernism beyond the imperial metropolis.[7] As I have argued elsewhere, 'the local' emerges in Australian and other 'provincial modernisms' of this period as a new and self-consciously modern mode of global positioning that challenges old distinctions between the 'centre' and 'the periphery' or the metropolis and the colony.[8]

I argue therefore that instead of reading the novel as nationalist we might read it as both regional and cosmopolitan. These two terms should not be seen as contradictory. Rather the vision of the cosmopolitan at play in the novel does not demand a departure from the local or the regional but rather sees local and regional emplacement as allowing a way of being in the world that is able to think beyond state borders and the lines of identification that are drawn by the nation.

Part I: 'The Spirit of the Land'

We might start by examining the map of 'Part of the Land of Capricornia' that was included in early editions of the novel and was also used to promote the novel. An early advertisement from *The Publicist* presented this map above an enthusiastic description of the novel as 'thoroughly, completely, brilliantly Australian!' and 'the novel of the Spirit of the Land'.[9] However, the map itself offers very little that would allow us to locate the 'land of Capricornia' in a recognisably Australian space. Focused on the two hundred square miles that contain the main narrative action of the novel, Herbert's map dislocates the region of Capricornia from a recognisable national map. There is no reference here to the familiar shape of the Australian continent; and while the coastline bears a resemblance to the Northern Territory and Port Zodiac (the main setting of the novel) is placed as more or less equivalent to Darwin, the correspondence is loose and ambiguous.

In the novel itself *Spirit of the Land* is the name of a boat that runs the path between the north coast and a series of off-shore islands; these islands appear at the top of the map, dotting what it calls 'the silver sea'.[10] The boat's name can be read as referencing one of the key figures of Australian literary and cultural nationalist discourse in Australia at the time of the novel's publication and particularly P.R.Stephensen's 1932 text, 'Foundations of Culture in Australia', which located the unique basis for Australian national identity in place, drawing on D.H. Lawrence's figuration of 'the spirit of the place'.[11] Stephensen was also the publisher of *Capricornia* and, as in the advertisement discussed above, his promotions of the novel reference this figure heavily in order to position *Capricornia* as a great novel of nation.

As I have argued elsewhere, figures like 'the spirit of the land' and 'the spirit of the place' were linked to the rise of an ethnic nationalist sensibility in the period, particularly by figures like Stephensen, who was strongly associated with the emergence of the Australia First Movement, a right-wing nationalist movement that wanted to promote a *blut und boden* style of nationalism in Australia. The emphasis on place within this style of nationalist discourse compensated for the anxiety that 'race' could not adequately differentiate the settler from her European heritage. Figures like 'the spirit of the land' and 'the Australian born' attempt to imagine the settler nation as an insular and organic entity and to override the real histories of migration and displacement that characterised its formation.[12]

It is possible to read this figure in the novel, the *Spirit of the Land*, as part of the novel's nationalist sensibility.[13] Certainly in his enthusiasm for the novel Stephensen read it in this way. However, if we turn to the novel itself and the object that holds this name, *a boat*, we can note that rather that working to inscribe Australian space as the basis for a coherent national identity, the *Spirit of the Land* in fact works to render the borders of Australian space indistinct and to forge lines of transaction and travel that disrupt the fantasy of Australia as a coherent and bounded community. The trajectories traced by the boat and its captains, Mark Shillingsworth and Chook Henn, extend the boundaries of Capricornia beyond a clearly delimited landmass to the surrounding seascapes, to the islands that dot the Capricornia coastline and further north to Southeast Asia. Mark and Chook first travel to Flying Fox Island, a small island settlement off the north coast, with ambitions to fish for trepang, 'the great sea-slug, prized by wealthy Chinamen as a delicacy and aphrodisiac!'[14] After failing in this endeavour they adopt a plan from Japanese pearlers to 'set up a new camp on Chineri Island in the Tikkalalla Group and to fish for pearl-shell on the shallow banks that lay between there and the Dutch East-Indies'.[15] Thus while it is possible to read the vessel as an example of the text's adoption of the nationalist rhetoric of the time and as a literal symbol of the text's nationalist agenda, we might also read it as an ironic commentary on the porous boundaries of national space and the disavowed dependencies between 'land' as an object of nationalist identification and the indeterminacies of a surrounding seascape. There is certainly a joke at play in calling a boat the *Spirit of the Land*.

In a discussion of what she calls Australia's 'insular imagination', Suvendrini Perera describes Australia's impassioned identification as an 'island nation'.Perera argues that in Australian nationalist discourse the idea of a clearly defined and unified land mass, bordered ('girt') by sea, operates as a compensatory fantasy, a 'unifying figure' that confers coherence upon the multiple and incommensurate histories and populations that characterise the settler colony: 'Against the *temporal* asymmetries of colonial society (who came when? Who was here before?); this island is a sign that projects *spatial* completeness and membership in a collective.'[16]

While Australia's island status is experienced as a geographical truth, as though its borders were natural and given, it is in fact the effect of ongoing practices of territorialisation. As Perera argues, carefully maintained ideologies of an ocean-bound nation-state work to protect the Australian nation from racial and spatial contamination, expelling foreign bodies (and we should think here, as Perera does, of the ongoing anxiety about refugee boats in Australian waters), but also to enclose Indigenous people within clearly demarcated boundaries. The plotting of a singular island continent overwrites the, in fact, proliferating histories and experiences of space, in particular the trade routes that precede and exceed the history of Australia's European settlement, and Indigenous understandings of country.

We might argue that it is precisely this fantasy of Australia as a clearly demarcated and insular landmass that is disrupted by Mark and Chook's journeys on the *Spirit of the Land*. Mark and Chook associate these endeavours with a kind of boy-scout-style 'freedom to go adventuring in the wilderness or on the Silver Sea', imagining that the sea country around the Northern Territory Coast is uncharted territory.[17] However, the trepang fishing trade they attempt to infiltrate has a long history with the Indigenous people of the area and the

Macassans, the people who worked this trade route, usually coming from the islands of what is now known as Indonesia. Like Chook and Mark, the Macassans collected trepang along the Australian coast to trade with China. The trepang fishing trade is a key example of the lines of transaction that precede and exceed the coding of the Australian continent as a self-contained and isolated entity. In his important study of this trade Campbell MacKnight argued that these sea routes might pose an alternative mapping of the region, a counter-geography that displaces nation and state: 'If one ignores political boundaries and looks on the sea as a unifying rather than divisive agent, a strong case can be made for regarding the northern coast of Australia as the final extremity of Southeast Asia.'[18]

Herbert's novel is only partially aware of this history. There is a reference to the Macassan presence in the region in the first paragraph of the novel when Herbert suggests the European invasion is not, despite the beliefs of the pioneers, the first contact this community has had with foreigners. The Aborigines, he tells us, were 'hostile because used to resisting casual invaders from the near East Indies'.[19] Chook and Mark remain unaware they are installing themselves in a trade route that is centuries old. Nonetheless, as if unconsciously acting out of this now repressed history, the novel's protagonist, Norman Shillingsworth, who is born on an island off the Australian north coast in a trepang fishing camp, comes to believe that he is the son of a Javanese princess. The implications of MacKnight's counter-geographies, that Northern Australia might be the south-most tip of Asia and indeed that Macassan 'men who returned to the coast over and over again over many years' might be accepted 'as in a sense Australians',are played out in the story that is invented about Norman's heritage by his family in an attempt to protect him from racial prejudice.[20] The story encodes a history that decouples Aboriginal people from the white nation by opening up additional lines of transaction between Australia, Indonesia and China that precede and exceed the drawing of state lines.

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'What if the ground beneath our feet turns out to be the sea?'[21]

Perera argues that the imperial history of landscape construction that founds the fantasy of Australia as a bounded land mass is 'characterized by an elemental divide between land and sea that values land as property and reduces ocean to the status of a "homogenised *commons*".'[22] In the novel's opening, a satiric account of the settlement of Australia, this divide is undone as ground quite literally turns out to be sea. Herbert's incompetent pioneers blunder from one site to another spreading chaos and violence;they 'having several times to abandon land they won with slaughter … go slaughtering again to secure more'.[23] But their attempts at territorial possession are over and again undermined by what Herbert calls 'the violence of the climate', what turns out to be the shifting levels of river and tide during the wet season:

> During Wet Season, which normally lasted for five months, beginning in November and slowly developing till the Summer Solstice, from when it raged till the Equinox, a good eighty inches of rain fell in such fertile places on the coast as had been chosen, and did so at the rate of from two to eight inches at a fall. As all these fertile places were low lying, it was obviously impossible to settle on them permanently.[24]

Herbert's pioneers settle a town they call 'New Westminster' three times and each time it is 'swept into the Silver Sea by the floods of the generous wet season'. They move on to found 'Princetown', 'Britannia and Port Leroy'; 'All were eventually swept into the Silver Sea'.[25] The opening therefore satirises the acts of colonial acquisition, as well as the technologies of mapping and naming which attempt not just to claim sovereignty over territory but also to fix the land within the rigid and linear lines of the map. As geographer Richie Howitt has argued, northern coastal areas challenge a geographical tradition that insists on stable boundaries and assumes the 'ontological' distinction between land and water creates 'natural' boundaries: 'the Wet season regularly inundates coastal planes so that the "land" looks very much like a swamp whose continuities with estuarine environments are at least as notable as their continuities with terrestrial ones'.[26] In Herbert's opening, coastlines shift and rivers swell and then disappear. The land quite literally moves, confounding the attempts of what he calls 'the Anglo-Saxon builders of Empire' to hold their place.[27]

It is possible to read this opening as primarily a critique of British colonialism, the 'British Crown' and the 'Anglo-Saxon builders of Empire' and to argue that the novel wants to redeem the nation from its violent colonial past. However, I would suggest that in fact nation and nationalism are shown to rest upon the same conceptual foundations as the violent and misguided acts of colonial acquisition that precede them. This is demonstrated most clearly in an episode about halfway through the novel where Norman Shillingsworth—the 'hero' and in many ways the nationalist centre of the novel—becomes lost in the same country that opens the text. In this episode Norman occupies the same position as the pioneers and misreads the country in the same way.

What betrays Norman in this episode is his reliance on maps and his consequent inability to see and read the country. The map, we can argue, is one of the key technologies of colonial exploration or 'pioneering' as Herbert calls it. The map constructs the landscape as a static system of signs that can be read scopically and recorded objectively by the settler or explorer, thus rendering the landscape both knowable and able to be possessed.[28] But in this episode Norman's dependence on the map is precisely what stops him from reading the obvious signs presented by the sky and the contours of the land, both of which indicate coming rains that will transform the landscape and make it impossible to traverse:

> Thus, though lately he had become well-skilled in the art of using his eyes, all unconscious of the river's dangerous potentialities, he rode up the grassy flood bank, under a rain filled sky, towards a destination that to him was only an inscription on a map.[29]

The reference to Norman's visual skill is clearly ironic as reading the map is shown here to be directly counter to seeing. When riding along the grassy flood bed of the river, Norman doesn't see the 'scored and snag-littered bed of the grass spaces flanking' the river, or the 'ridge a good thirty feet above the level of the river, which meant that the river was capable of spreading to a width of at least twelve chains and rising thirty feet'.[30] Indeed, the map not only stops Norman from seeing the land but also gives him a false account, as he finds there are 'six times as many creeks to cross as the map-makers predicted'. The reason for this, as Norman realises after the fact, is that 'the country was surveyed in the Dry', and the surveyors, perhaps, 'would not expect to have to serve Wet-Season travellers'.[31]

But the problem Norman faces here, I would suggest, is not really the seasonal limitations of this particular map but rather the limitations of the map as a technology that has its foundations in precisely those acts of pioneering that are satirised in the novel's opening. We can argue, therefore, that Herbert not only places Norman in the same position as the incompetent pioneers who open the novel but also shows him to be the direct inheritor of their knowledge and technology. In this sense, the nation cannot be assumed to transcend or redeem the violence and folly of Empire building because the relationship between Empire and nation is shown to be one of continuity rather than rupture.

On this count it is important to note that Herbert refuses to essentialise Norman's Aboriginal genetic background. While the episode marks Norman's acknowledgement of his 'Aboriginal heritage' for the first time, Herbert will not give Norman any special knowledge of the land on account of this genetic fact. Indeed, the suggestion is that Norman's new self-knowledge gives him a false confidence in the land which will ultimately find him stranded. Norman remains, despite his ancestry, in the position of the befuddled and incompetent settler or pioneer, although one who now wants to claim an Aboriginal heritage.

Herbert's ironic treatment of Norman in this scene works against what is often read as a desire to cast Norman Shillingsworth as a redemptive figure and a figure for national autochthony. In the next section I expand upon the way the novel's narrative voice and use of narrative irony works to decentre Norman. I ask, what imaginative possibilities are opened up by a reading practice that resists the central protagonist?

Part II: Losing Norman

Capricornia is generally read as centred on the character of Norman Shillingsworth. These readings position the novel, either implicitly or explicitly, as a national bildungsroman where the maturation of a central character is read allegorically as expressing something about the maturation of the nation itself.[32] Certainly Herbert's decision to make a mixed-race boy the central figure of his novel was part of a broader desire to challenge and ultimately displace the hypocritical and violent 'whiteness' of the Australian national imaginary and to offer in its place a figure for the nation that brought together Indigenous and settler culture and history. We can argue that Norman also serves as a figure of autochthony in the novel. For Herbert, the part Aboriginal parentage of the 'Euraustralians' as he called the children of white fathers and Aboriginal mothers, afforded them a claim to Australianess that wasn't available to white men like himself. Herbert contended that for white men fathering an Aboriginal child was the only way to claim authentic Australian belonging. As he would write to his publisher, Stephensen: 'We are not Australian, Inky. Only those lucky people are … there is no help for us, except that we place our poor Aboriginal souls, through a lubra into a yeller feller—a true Australian.'[33] Arguably the story of Norman Shillingsworth and his white father, Mark, provides a vertical axis for the novel that serves a fantasy about national depth and origin.

But while Norman is certainly the novel's central character and the story of Norman the nationalist centre of the novel, the text also works to problematise, ironise and displace this centrality. In this section of the essay I consider what happens if we trouble Norman Shillingsworth's assumed position at the centre of the novel. What other narrative possibilities are opened up? If, as I have argued, we can interpret the episode where Norman gets lost in the bush as working to problematise the novel's desire for a figure of nationalist autochthony, here I want to suggest that it is our prerogative, as readers, to lose Norman among the swell of other characters and voices that people the novel.

This is a reading project that is invited by Herbert himself in the alphabetical list of 'principal characters' that opens the novel. With over one hundred entries the list serves as both an early instigation of the novel's excessive vision and also as an ordering of that impulse, a containment of its chaotic energies within the categorical confines of the alphabetised index. Yet, as a form that implies equalisation, the index also works to displace the necessarily hierarchical ordering of plot. The index begins not with the so-called principal characters, Norman and Mark Shillingsworth, but rather with the characters whose names appear at the beginning of the alphabet: AINTEE, DR., followed by ANGEL, followed by ANNA.[34]

Furthermore, if the use of the alphabet suggests a kind of ordering, it is nonetheless worth noting that Norman himself does not appear on the list in a simple and ordered way. The entry for Norman under N asks the reader to '*See* SHILLINGSWORTH, NORMAN'.[35] However, no such entry exists and Norman only appears under an entry for SHILLINGSWORTH CHILDREN: 'Three in number, viz: (1) Marigold and (2) Roger, the children of Oscar and Jasmine; (3) Norman ("Nawnim"), a half-caste Aboriginal, the son of Mark and of the lubra Marowallua'.[36] Looking for Norman Shillingsworth in the opening list, then, is no simple thing; the reader must traverse the long list of characters only to find the protagonist, without his own entry, buried alongside his half brother and sister, both minor characters, the former of whom appears only very briefly before dying in infancy.

We might argue then that the list of characters at the beginning of the text works to deprioritise the novel's main characters, levelling them with the novel's excessive cast of minor characters. In doing this it also invites a reading practice that deprioritises what is generally seen as the novel's central plot thread—the relationship between Norman and his father. In his study of the minor character in English literature, Alex Woloch argues that the Aristotelian ideal of narrative as a unified and complete whole with a coherent beginning, middle and end is often achieved through the focus on a single character: 'Just as a single unified form comes to resemble, according to Aristotle, an independent "living organism", so narrative often revolves merely around one life story, one "living person" whose distinct personality is externalised through the literary work as a whole.'[37] Woloch's argument makes character and plot inseparable. Here I take up this idea to suggest that in *Capricornia* deprioritising the central character enables a scattering of narrative attention and a turning towards (or multiple turnings towards) minor characters and subplots.

Furthermore, I suggest that the narrative dispersal implied in the opening list is not simply of formal interest but rather has important implications for how we read the politics of the novel. A reading that focuses on the central characters and central plot makes the novel's nationalism central and also makes it possible to reconcile the novel with its fascist publication history. As I have detailed elsewhere, *Capricornia* was first published and promoted by the Publicist group, the fascist nationalist group that would go on to become the Australia First Movement. Although there are some clear contradictions between the Publicist group's investments in white Australia and the novel's antiracism, the novel's main plotline, with its focus on fathers and sons, could be made to serve a fantasy about the organic nation and national autochthony that was fully coherent with the Publicist group's investment in the nation as *blut und boden*.[38]

In stark contrast to the novel's potential fascist agenda, we can note that its broader cast of characters refers outwards and disrupts the vertical axis of the main plot that wants to tie the protagonist down to a fantasy about belonging to national soil. In the opening list, we are given a cast of characters that are Chinese, Japanese, Scottish and Greek as well as of the Mullanmulluck tribe. A reading practice that attends to the dispersal of narrative energy implied in the opening list opens us up to an alternative politics in the novel. This politics, I would suggest, is global and cosmopolitan rather than nationalist. In the first part of this essay I have shown how the novel's spatial imagination works to upset the fantasy of Australia as a bounded and coherent entity, opening up the Australian space to non-national histories and trajectories. In this final section I point to a few select moments where the novel's characterological and narrative imagination works in a similar way: displacing the central characters and plot and therefore also troubling the novel's assumed nationalism.

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In a novel that is in many ways preoccupied with fathers and substitute father figures, the episode that the young Nawnim (later Norman) spends with Fat Anna is the sole maternal episode. As Elizabeth Lawson has argued, *Capricornia* entails a structural repression of the mother figure from start to finish.[39] Nonetheless, the episode with Fat Anna that occurs between the small boy's abandonment by his father and adoption by his uncle and most significant substitute father, Oscar, briefly interrupts this logic. Nawnim spends ten days living with Fat Anna, 'a mass of flesh' with an 'ample breast' who feeds Nawnim sweets, washes him and crops his hair until he is 'snuggling up to her in sheer love'.[40] The episode occurs before the protagonist is given the name, Norman, which will allow him to become a figure for the national type. Nawnim, which means 'no name' is the name 'given by the natives to dogs for whom they had no love but had not the heart to kill or lose [and] … is often given to half-castes as well'.[41] While the name offers a biting critique of the denial of humanity to Capricornia's 'half-caste' population we can also argue that certain possibilities are closed off once Nawnim becomes the over-determined figure of Norman.

If Fat Anna has no real purpose in terms of the logic of a narrative that is mostly interested in fathers and sons, she nonetheless works to briefly position Norman/ Nawnim within broader and more cosmopolitan networks. Fat Anna, we are told in the opening list, is 'classified as Aboriginal, though daughter of a Japanese'.[42] The logic at play here, as the novel will explain, is that the state, what it calls 'the Law of the Land', 'recognize[s] no diluent for Aboriginal blood but that of the white race'.[43] If, as Perera argues, Australian practices of territorialisation work to firmly enclose Indigenous people within the nation while excluding racial others, Fat Anna deterritorialises by suggesting networks of relationship that do not conform to the insular logics of a bounded Australian territory implied by a classificatory system that cannot recognise the ongoing histories of non-white immigrants and visitors on the Australian continent.[44] Putting it more concretely, Fat Anna's parentage, a Japanese father and an Aboriginal mother, implies histories, networks and desires that bypass white Australia.

The episode also briefly exposes Nawnim (and the reader) to the unregulated, transnational economies of Capricornia that exist in excess of state regulation and transcend national lines. Although without franchise as a classified 'full blood', Fat Anna is financially independent and 'earn[s] her living by washing clothes for the richer members of the Asiatic crews of the pearling fleets and by giving her favours to those of them she liked'.[45] Indeed the novel takes pains to describe Fat Anna as a figure who slips past the controls of the state, 'liv[ing] in her own style, untroubled by the formalities that bound the rest of the band to which she legally belonged'.[46]

Most significantly, Nawnim's relationship with Fat Anna suggests the possibility of non-biological affiliations and thus exceeds the novel's interest in national autochthony. This coupling of non-biological affiliation with the possibility of a space beyond the bureaucratic, economic and social control of the state is notable in a novel that generally wants to pose biology as the main alternative to an unconscionable state. I would argue that episodes like this pose an alternative social and political imaginary to that implied by the novel's main narrative line. This positioning of Fat Anna as an alternative becomes explicit in an intervention by the narrator when Fat Anna reappears weeks and some pages later. With Nawnim now in the custody of his reluctant uncle, Oscar, Fat Anna appears briefly through a moving train window, 'a yellow face, round as the moon at full and wide-eyed and open-mouthed'. But she remains unrecognised by Oscar who, we are told, 'never realized how close he came to solving the problem completely'.[47] Oscar, unbeknownst to him, has missed an obvious solution to the problem he is facing of what to do with the 'half-caste' nephew who has been thrust upon him unwanted.

Although one might miss it, this brief intervention from the narrator poses a possible solution to the 'problem' of the mixed-race child outside the main logic of the novel and its preoccupation with fathers. As a protest novel, *Capricornia*'s main political and moral concern is how the nation should take responsibility for the children of Aboriginal mothers and white fathers, what it calls the 'twenty thousand half-castes in the country'.[48] The answer it presents to this question, for the most part, is that white biological fathers should bring up their Aboriginal children in order to protect them from the Aboriginal department and the cruelties of state care. However, the narrator in this moment suggests an alternative in the figure of Fat Anna who is not a father or biological relative of Nawnim, but is not a figure for the state either. Fat Anna's elective affinities and non-biological family also slip state controls. The narrator's solution here is one that is missed by the novel's main characters and it is also one that is missed by the main narrative arch of the novel itself. The train pulls away and the story moves on from Fat Anna who will only appear once more when Norman accidently visits her as a young man.

The episode with Fat Anna typifies the way the novel's plot pulls against the more expansive potential of small episodes and minor characters. Something similar happens at the 'half-caste' dinner that occurs just before the return of Mark, the father, to the family homestead towards the end of the novel. It is Christmas at Red Ochre cattle station, which is currently occupied by Cho, a Chinese cook, Norman and Tocky, the 'quadroon' girl who is his love interest. Like the episode surrounding Fat Anna, this episode imagines a society without white people and the novel asks, once again, what social relationships exist and might be possible outside the preoccupations of white Australia and outside the narrative logic of the plot:

> It was as strange a dinner as it was excellent, being half-Anglo-Saxon and half-Chinese—a half-caste dinner, as Cho called it—for the convenience of the mixed company that ate it. And it was prepared with so much cunning that the borderline between the tastes of Orient and Occident was not perceivable, so that Orientals and Occidentals were able with relish to make inroads into one another's fare; and thus the twain were brought together for once at least. The Occidental guests were Norman and Tocky. The host was Cho. The others were Chinese friends of Cho's who brought much of the stuff for making the Oriental dishes.[49]

The scene represents a cattle station, a key site in the white Australian imaginary, taken over by Chinese national festivities. Cho's Chinese friends arrive in national costume bringing the foodstuffs for Chinese dishes and speaking Chinese so that 'between the two sections communion was mostly restricted to nods and smiles'.[50] But it does this without the well-worn paranoia about Chinese encroachment on white Australia. In fact the narrator remains unabashedly enthusiastic about the scene at play, which appears as something like a proto-multicultural moment although one which occurs without any reference to white people.

The scene is interrupted by Mark Shillingsworth, Norman's father. Labelled un-ironically by the narrator as the 'Uninvited Guest', Mark appears on Boxing Day 'when the feast was at its height' and 'put[s] an end to the Christmas party' by demanding that Cho and the Chinese guests leave.[51] Mark is anxious about the company because he has murdered a Chinese man and so is embroiled in on going conflict with the Chinese community. But his enraged protest in response to Norman's suggestion that Cho be allowed to stay—'Oh hell, my boy—can't you see it's impossible having him here while I'm here?'—also speaks to the logic of the plot which, it seems, must dispense with the broader cast of characters in order to narrow itself towards a conclusion that reconciles the white father and the Aboriginal son. This conclusion, it would appear, can only be reached at the expense of other more expansive notions of community.

Nonetheless, if Mark, the white father, interrupts, we might argue that Cho and his half-caste dinner interrupts also in that although the demands of the plot mean that the scene remains episodic it also gives voice to alternative imaginings of community that grate against and pull away from the over-determined scene of white father and Aboriginal son. This comes through in the narrator's enthusiastic description of the party and its cuisine. But also in the protests of Cho himself, who lays claim to Red Ochre on different terms from those made by the Shillingsworth family who own the station. As Cho says:

> White man him nussing here. This'l station belong colourman. Me—Hi'm partnel longa boss. Thad one dere him boss—harlcase. Me Australian—gottim all-same light sit-down this one countly same's you. Papa belong me Chineeman. Papa belonga you English. All-same.Folliner.[52]

Leaving aside Herbert's awkward and perhaps parodic rendering of the Chinese accent, we might argue that Cho presents something like a theory of cosmopolitan belonging through the figure of the foreigner. The foreigner is not reserved for the Chinese immigrant but rather becomes the basic template of Australian identity: to be Australian is to be from somewhere else. It is also the basis of something like a universal right, 'all same light', to a kind of belonging, to 'sit down this one countly'.

Significantly Cho is also a figure of hospitality, extending the invitation to sit down, to eat his food and to celebrate to a broad cast of characters. Jacques Derrida makes hospitality to the foreigner, 'the Law of an unconditional hospitality, offered a priori, to all newcomers, *whoever they may be*',the centre of a cosmopolitan ethics to come.[53] Reading Cho through this model of the cosmopolitan we can note that he combines the figure of the host with the figure of the foreigner therefore extending the hand of hospitality but without the claim to priority or ownership over space that is often inseparable from the act of hosting. Read against the novel's broader investment in autochthony, genealogy and depth we can argue that Cho's claim to belonging is voiced through the language of surface rather than depth and in terms of temporary emplacement rather than priority and inheritance.

It needs to be acknowledged that Cho's self-declared status as the host, even host as foreigner, displaces the idea that there might be a prior and more primary claim to the land and to the status of host than that made by the foreigner. That is to say, the theory of cosmopolitan belonging that I have argued Herbert inscribes in this moment undermines any acknowledgement of Indigenous sovereignty. Here the Indigenous is made part of the community of the 'colourman', that is a community formulated around an expansive understanding of race, rather than in relation to understandings of sovereignty and land priority. Nonetheless the larger displacement that is made by Cho's statement, at least in terms of the logic of the novel, is the displacement of the white father.

The last and perhaps most significant interruption to the logic of the plot comes in the final moments of the novel when Norman finds the bones of Tocky and his own child in an empty water tank:

> He climbed the ladder, looked inside, saw a skull and a litter of bones. He gasped. A human skull—no—two—a small one and a tiny one. And human hair and rags and clothes and a pair of bone filled boots. Two skulls, a small one and a tiny one. Tocky and her baby! The crows alighted in a gnarled dead coolibah near by and cried dismally, 'Kah!—Kah!—Kaaaaah!'[54]

The final episode is there to undercut our enjoyment in the novel's 'happy ending': the reconciliation of father and son and the news of a boom in the cattle industry:

> 'A boom!' cried Heather again. 'Oh no credit to booze artists this time—and no thieving bookkeepers.' She turned shining eyes on Mark and cried, 'You wouldn't do a bunk with the cash, would you, dear?'
>
> 'Me?' laughed Mark. 'And leave a treasure like you behind?'
>
> She took his arm, then Norman's and drew them to her.[55]

Herbert therefore ends the novel by juxtaposing two images of family: one that brings together the white family and the Indigenous child in an image of national redemption and one which demonstrates the violent exclusions that this national fantasy rests upon. In addition, the image of Tocky's bones refers us back to the novel's violent opening and to the bones of most of the Larrapuna tribe that lie under the town of Port Zodiac.[56] If the novel's plot pulls us along a linear trajectory to a final image of national cohesion and redemption, Tocky, whose name suggests the sound of a broken second hand that can't make its way around the clock face, forces us to pause and pulls us backwards.

To finish: if, as I have argued, *Capricornia*'s cosmopolitan sensibility resides in its form and style, I would suggest that excavating this alternative politics in the novel requires a particular style of reading. This reading asks that we resist the satisfactions of the plot and dwell instead upon the interpretive possibility of the disruptive episode. It requires us to treat the novel's nationalist sermonising with the same suspicion as the narrator whose detached and wondering consciousness will always move on from these moments to offer another perspective on this history and another version of community.

About the author

Ellen Smith has published essays on Australian modernism, Katharine Susannah Prichard, Xavier Herbert and the Indigenous artist, Julie Gough. She has a PhD in English from Princeton University (2012) and has held postdoctoral research fellowships at the University of Melbourne and the Menzies Centre for Australian Studies at King's College London. She currently teaches Literary Studies at Deakin University.

Notes

1. See for example Michael Griffiths, 'Biopolitical Correspondences: Settler Nationalism, Thanatopolitics, and the Perils of Hybridity', *Australian Literary Studies*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2011, pp. 20–42; Michael Ellis, 'Exercising Dominion: Landscape, Civilisation and Racial Politics in *Capricornia*', *Revista Ilha do Desterro: A Journal of English Language, Literatures in English and Cultural Studies*, vol. 69, no. 2, 2016, pp. 43–55;Fiona Probyn-Rapsey, 'Some Whites Are Whiter than Others: The Whitefella Skin Politics of Xavier Herbert and Cecil Cook', in *'Spectres, Screens, Shadows, Mirrors', special issue of Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature*, 2007, pp. 157–73; Ellen Smith, 'White Aborigines: Xavier Herbert, P.R. Stephensen and the *Publicist*', *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2014, pp. 97–116.
2. For an account of *Capricornia*'s publication and early reception see Smith, 'White Aborigines'.
3. Suvendrini Perera, *Australia and the Insular Imagination*, Palgrave Macmillan,New York, 2009.

4. Rebecca L. Walkowitz, Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism Beyond the Nation, Columbia University Press, New York, 2006, p. 2.

5. Ibid,p. 7.

6. See Raymond Williams, 'Metropolitan Perception and the Emergence of Modernism' in The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists, Verso, London and New York, 1989.

7. See Susan Stanford Friedman, 'Planetarity: Musing Modernist Studies', Modernism/ Modernity, vol. 17, no. 3, 2010, pp. 471–99; Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, 'The New Modernist Studies', PMLA, vol. 123, no. 3, 2008, pp. 737–48. For an application of these questions to the Australian context specifically see Robert Dixon and Veronica Kelly (ed.), Impact of the Modern: Vernacular Modernities in Australia 1870–1960, Sydney University Press, Sydney, 2008; Ellen Smith, 'Local Moderns: The Jindyworobak Movement and Australian Modernism', Australian Literary Studies, vol. 27, no. 1, 2012, pp. 1–17; Ian Henderson, 'Modernism, Antipodernism, and Australian Aboriginality', in Decolonizing the Landscape: Indigenous Cultures in Australia, ed. Beate Neumeier and Kay Schaffer, Rodopi, Amsterdam and New York, 2014, pp. 89–106.

8. Smith, 'Local Moderns'.

9. The advertisement I refer to here is from The Publicist, February 1938, p. 14.

10. Xavier Herbert, Capricornia, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 2002, p. 23.

11. P.R. Stephensen, The Foundations of Culture in Australia, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1986, p. 11.

12. See Smith, 'White Aborigines'; Craig Munro, Wild Man of Letters: The Story of P.R. Stephensen, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1984.

13. See for example Sean Monahan, 'Xavier Herbert's Capricornia: In Praise of the Swagman Spirit', Westerly, no. 4, December 1985, pp. 15–24.

14. Herbert, p. 23.

15. Ibid., p. 53.

16. Perera, p. 17.

17. Herbert, p. 22.

18. Campbell MacKnight, The Voyage to Marge: Macassan Trepangers in Northern Australia, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1976, p. 128.

19. Herbert, p. 1.

20. MacKnight, p. 128.

21. Perera, p. 1.

22. Ibid. p. 22.

23. Herbert, p. 1.

24. Ibid., p. 2.

25. Ibid.

26. Richie Howitt, 'Frontiers, Borders, Edges: Liminal Challenges to the Hegemony of Exclusion, Australian Geographical Studies, vol. 39, no. 2, 2001, pp. 239–40.

27. Herbert, p. 1.

28. Simon Ryan, The Cartographic Eye: How Explorers Saw Australia, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York; Melbourne, 1996, pp. 101-27.

29. Herbert, p. 339.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid., p. 343.

32. See, particularly, Harry Heseltine, Xavier Herbert, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1973; Elizabeth Lawson, '"Oh Don't you Remember Black Alice?" or How Many Mothers had Norman Shillingsworth?', Westerly, vol. 33, no.3, 1987, pp. 29–44.

33. Reproduced in Frances de Groen and Laurie Hergenhan (eds), Xavier Herbert: Letters,University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 2002, p. 70.

34. Herbert, p. xv.

35. Ibid., p. xviii.

36. Ibid., p. xix.

37. Alex Woloch, The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2009, p. 1.

38. See Smith, 'White Aborigines'.

39. Lawson.

40. Herbert, p. 63.

41. Ibid., p. 46.

42. Ibid., p. xvi.

43. Ibid., p. 63.

44. Perera, p. 27.

45. Herbert, p. 63.

46. Ibid., p. 63.

47. Ibid., p. 101.

48. Ibid., p. 95.

49. Ibid., p. 463.

50. Ibid., p. 464.

51. Ibid., p. 468.

52. Ibid., p. 470.

53. Jacques Derrida, On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness, Trans. Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes, Routledge, New York and London, 2001, p. 22.

54. Herbert, p. 577.

55. Ibid., p. 578.

56. Ibid., p. 2.

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