



# 'Journeys into Dirt' in Robyn Davidson's *Tracks* (1980) and Patrick White's *Voss* (1957)



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The 2019 Association for the Study of Australian Literature Conference took as its theme the subject of 'dirt', and inspired this paper which examines the 'journeys into dirt' by explorer figures in Patrick White's 1957 novel *Voss* and Robyn Davidson's 1980 memoir *Tracks*. Drawing on theory of dirt developed by material ecocritic Helen Sullivan and by philosopher Olli Lagerspetz we demonstrate that the narratives of their travels show them engaged in transformative encounters with the Australian desert. In doing so we challenge Tom Lynch's reading of the two texts as 'traversals' which portray the desert as 'alien, hostile and undifferentiated void'. Using Keith Garebian's distinction between 'desert' and 'garden' we examine how these explorers find and respond to 'the garden in the desert'. Davidson couches her memoir as an exploration narrative and treats the desert as a 'lived space' which she 'writes home'; having learned how to 'be' in it, and so to 'recover' the garden in the desert. Like her, Voss and his companions experience the desert as beautiful and inspirational, even, at times, nurturant and sustaining. Since Voss's orientation is spiritual and transcendent, however, White's treatment of the desert shows conceptual and corporeal boundaries between human and environment shifting and fading in their interaction with it. In both texts episodes occur of immersion in dirt – dust in *Tracks* and mud in *Voss* – which serve to illustrate and to emphasise the interconnectedness we humans have with the essential, elemental environment of dirt.

**Keywords:** deserts; journeys; travel narratives; dirt theory; ecocriticism; *Voss*; *Tracks*.

In 2019, the Association for the Study of Australian Literature chose 'Dirt' as its conference theme. The call for papers clarified that the theme was 'meant to evoke a number of dimensions of material and cultural life that inflect Australian literary and narrative cultures'. Conference convener Tony Hughes-d'Aeth (2020) says in his 'Introduction' to the issue of the *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature* (JASAL) based on a selection of the papers presented:

[I]n our thinking about a conference theme we had wanted to explore the way Australian literature and Australian literary studies were working in the contemporary moment and we settled suddenly on the concept of 'dirt'. The idea was proposed by my colleague, Alison Bartlett, and our organising committee were immediately taken with it as a concept. It seemed to touch on something essential – in an era sceptical of essences – and material. It reached out into the contested condition of Australian land: dirt as country, dirt as real estate. It reached out into the substance of life: dirt as biotic habitat. It reached out into the source of Australia's material prosperity: dirt as ore (pay-dirt), dirt as agricultural growing medium (soil). And it reached out into the negative connotation that dirt carries: dirt as scandal, as secret, as abject exclusion. (p. 1)

Ordinary definitions of the word 'dirt' do indeed carry negative connotations. Wikipedia calls dirt 'a blanket term for unclean matter'; the *Oxford Dictionary* defines it as 'a substance, such as mud or dust, that soils someone or something'. The roots of the word, evidently, are old Scandinavian 'drit' or excrement, although the form of the word has shifted, and its uses broadened, in modern English, to include the more colloquial 'soil or earth'. The conference call couched it as something 'essential', something 'material', and emphasised how the concept 'reaches out' in a range of ways.

Twentieth century theorists have associated the term, variously, with 'disorder', with 'abjection' and with 'disgust'. Recently, philosopher Olli Lagerspetz has argued against the 'easy reductionism' of some theorists for whom 'dirt is not really dirt but something else' (Smith 2018); in Mary Douglas's case as 'matter out of place'; in Julia Kristeva's as an idea banished to 'the misty regions of symbolism'; and, in Martha Nussbaum's, entailing 'disgust'. In words he takes from Wittgenstein, Lagerspetz discerns – and condemns – a dominant trend, in theoretical debate

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about dirt in the last decades, of 'craving for generality'; of evincing a 'contemptuous attitude towards the particular case'; of reflecting 'a need of powerful metaphors in general debates on culture and society'. This trend goes along with a predilection for 'shocking descriptions that supposedly are representative of the field of pollution and abjection in its entirety' (Lagerspetz 2018:23).

In its place, Lagerspetz (2018) proposes a new view of engagement with the world that is more located and more particular. He argues that 'questions of dirt and soiling can neither be reduced to hygiene nor to ritual pollution', but are 'integral to almost every human activity'. Hence, his aphorism:

*Homo sapiens* is also *Homo sordidus* – not merely the rational animal but also the dirty (and clean) animal, the animal whose life is in many ways regulated by ideas of the dirty and the clean. (Lagerspetz 2018:12)

Dirt, as he sees it, is therefore 'both a real quality of the world and part of a symbolic, culturally relative order' (emphasis ours, Smith 2018). His theory thus eschews the abstract in favour of 'practical cleanliness' in which:

[o]ur judgments about dirt imply ideas about what it is to *care* for the item that is soiled or might be soiled; and in which the *meaning* of the question 'Are your hands clean?' has to do with *what* is to be handled. (Lagerspetz 2014:37)

He frames such questions in terms of historian Susan Strasser's notion of our 'stewardship of objects' (Lagerspetz 2014:39) which involves a 'teleological understanding of the things that physically surround us' (p. 39), and activates the care and responsibility that characterise our attitude towards them. Because the recognition of dirt 'presupposes a world of culture, a world where human beings are in charge' (p. 39), the things in our environment 'have claims on us' (p. 36). We look on a dirty window, for example, and think 'it needs cleaning', or a sink full of dishes and register that they ought to be washed. It is within such a perspective, posits Lagerspetz, that our lives with dirt and cleanliness are made intelligible.

Writing a few years before Lagerspetz, the material eco-critic Helen Sullivan takes the defining nature of dirt considerably further. She uses dirt to challenge the idea of a boundary between humans and nature. It is a 'pernicious' idea, she says, that enables humans to 'possess, exploit and even destroy' nature. In place of this binary, her 'dirt theory' is based on 'material environmental immersion' (Sullivan 2012:518), and insists on the pervasive interaction that she sees as ongoing between humans and our environments. This theory maintains that we are 'enmeshed within dirt in its many forms' (p. 515), and that the boundary that separates us, if there is one, is a 'porous membrane' through which matter and energy are continuously exchanged, as air, water, food, heat, sweat, tears and waste. Human bodies and minds, therefore, are 'fully ensconced in material environments, which shape us just as vividly as we shape them' (p. 528).

The Australian conference call coincided with our beginning interest in literature of especially hot and dry desert lands. Robyn Davidson's 1980 memoir *Tracks* describes her 2700 km trek through the Australian desert and includes an epiphanic experience in which she strips off and rolls and bathes herself in its dirt, offering an apposite example of just such 'immersion'.

Early investigation of the critical field took us to eco-critic Tom Lynch's (2007) survey of Australian desert writing 'Literature in the Arid Zone'. In it, he contrasts works that 'recognise and value the biological particularities of specific desert places' with 'works that portray the desert as an alien, hostile, and undifferentiated void' (p. 71). In his reading, both *Tracks* and Patrick White's (1957) novel *Voss* fall into the latter category. Although, from an ecocritical point of view, 'deserts differ from one another in important ways', Lynch complains that much of the writing set in the Australian deserts, especially fiction, portrays them as 'more-or-less undifferentiated blankness, a threatening otherness that challenges all notions of normality' (p. 72). He offers a lexical explanation for this tendency. As lexicographer J.M. Arthur (2003) puts it: 'the English language, which evolved on a small, wet, foggy island, is poorly suited for rendering the landscapes of Australia, especially the large, dry, clear landscapes of the desert' (p. 26). And, concludes Lynch (2007):

[W]hen the English language is used to describe Australia's landscapes, especially arid landscapes, those lands will always seem to be flawed and deficient, more notable for what is absent than for what is present. (p. 72)

Even the word *desert* has this flaw, he says, given its verbal connotations of abandonment and forsaking.

Since Lynch has himself written movingly and faithfully about his own experiences in the desert of New Mexico, it is perhaps not surprising that he censures writers who treat the desert as 'undifferentiated void' (p. 73), writers who, as the American writer Wallace Stegner puts it, fail to 'get over the color green' (Stegner 1992:54 in Lynch 2007:74). Nor is it surprising that he should valorise a writer like Kim Mahood who, by contrast, is interested in the 'sensuous details of place' (p. 75) and records 'how her body inhabits the places she encounters' (p. 75). In Lynch's reading, Mahood offers 'complex physical and psychological portrayals ... of the arid zones of Australia' (p. 75); narrates the 'experiencing body engaged in a somatic and visceral relationship with the land' (p. 75); describes how 'the external world begins to interfuse with her body, producing a psycho-somatic integration of land, body, and mind' (p. 75); and works to 'break down the self/other distinction that has served to foster the sense of the desert as alien place' (pp. 75–76). By implication, neither *Tracks* nor *Voss* does these things.

Mahood's *Craft for a Dry Lake* is an example of a 'station-master's daughter memoir' (p. 73), which Lynch calls a

thriving genre of the pastoral. The pastoral is one of three dominant cultural orientations to deserts that he discerns in the literature – the other two being mining and traversal. The literature of mining and of the ‘lure and lore of lost mines’ (p. 76) is strong, he says, and ‘suggests a near-mystical symbolism in the link between industrial economies and nature perceived as exploitable resource’ (p. 76). Yet these novels, too, depend upon a ‘non-ecological portrayal of the desert as vast, largely lifeless, and especially threatening’ (p. 77). Many mining novels describe the desert and its residents in negative terms, emphasising the isolation of the mining communities, and the greed that inspires their search for mineral wealth, which together results in the immorality of what Roslynn Haynes terms ‘the Gothic Desert’ (in Lynch 2007:76).

The third orientation, traversal, Lynch sees as primary, and as the basis for much of the literature about deserts. This literature comes in for his sharpest criticism:

[T]he problem with so many of these narratives is that the desert is usually configured more as an obstacle to be conquered ... than as a worthwhile place in its own right. (Lynch 2007:77–78)

The experiences of English explorers in the 19th century and early 20th century serve as prototype, involving scientists, journalists and adventurers, and, more recently, those reconnoitring for potential tourism.

Robyn Davidson’s *Tracks: A Woman’s Solo Trek Across 1,700 Miles of Australian Outback*, and Patrick White’s *Voss* are indeed both traversals. White’s novel is set in the 1840s, and is based, according to Petersson (1988:313), on the journeys and diaries of Ludwig Leichhardt. Using third-person omniscient narration, it follows the journey into the interior of Johann Ulrich Voss, its central character. Set some 130 years later, Davidson’s *Tracks* is a first-person memoir based on her own experiences. The travellers in both texts cross the desert from east to west, though Voss starts from the coast and dies in the interior, and Robyn starts centrally and makes it, alive, to the west coast. Although Lynch is critical of both, we find in them intriguing instances of interaction between traveller and desert, which are worth exploring in more detail.

In his overview, Lynch gives scant space to White’s novel, calling it ‘the most celebrated example’ of a traversal narrative, but dismissing it as ‘more an exploration into the psychology of explorers than an inquiry into the characteristics of the desert and thus ‘hardly likely to overcome the prevailing antipathy to desert places’ (p. 82). And, rebutting Christy Collis’s enthusiastic review of Davidson’s memoir, Lynch sees *Tracks* as ‘more similar to than different from earlier desert narratives’ (p. 80), noting that Davidson did not make a home in the desert after journeying through it: ‘in fact she moved to that most un-desert like of places, England. The implicit message is that the desert remains a suitable place for an adventure, but not a suitable place for a home’ (p. 80); even that its ‘main value for Davidson lies precisely in its difference from familiar places’ (Lynch 2007:80).

The assessment seems a little unfair, based as it is on Davidson’s later life choices rather than her textual representation of the desert. Nor were her intentions ever overtly ‘pastoral’, in the sense of wishing to settle in the desert as ‘home’. One distinction Lynch allows *Tracks* is its ‘self-reflective subjectivity’, which ‘may represent a tipping point in the evolution of desert narratives, opening up certain possibilities for reconfiguring the desert, especially but not exclusively by women’ (p. 80). In this regard, Lynch might have given cognisance (but didn’t) to the initiative and impact of Gertrude Bell and Freya Stark, both desert explorers elsewhere in the world, both women.

While recognising the value of the model Lynch proposes, we would like to disagree, to some extent, with his reading of the two traversals. Following Lagerspetz’s example, we wish to examine the desert worlds in these texts as both ‘located and particular’. Although initially resistant, the explorers have encounters with the desert that are transformative, which redefine them in fundamental ways. Although evidently ‘alien and hostile’, the desert is not ‘undifferentiated’. Its dirt is certainly essential, material: it is also, at times, generative and productive. The desert is of course ‘shaped’ by the representation of the explorers who venture into it. However, it exerts shaping influence on them too. Embedded, enmeshed and ensconced, the explorers ultimately engage in a ‘material environmental immersion’ (Sullivan 2012:518) that redefines their ‘traversals’ as ‘journeys into dirt’.

Writing a few years before Lynch, Paul Genoni (2001) offers a more nuanced view of the ‘place of the explorer in the Australian psyche’ (p. 13). Observing a shift in emphasis, in recent analysis, away from the ‘heroic individuals who expanded the empire’ (Genoni 2001:13), he notes an increased interest in ‘the processes by which the land was travelled, signified and brought within the purview of the empire’ (p. 13). The explorers’ journals are crucial, says Genoni (2001), because they carry a:

[p]ersonal, interpretive overlay which was formed by the explorer’s own expectations, imagination and experience [and were thus] central to the process by which the land was firstly known and then further imagined into being by their nineteenth century readers. (p. 14)

The ways in which the land was ‘imagined into being’ served both to destroy and to create myths about the interior. Because large areas of the continent ‘remain infrequently visited and little known’, as Deane Fergie (1996:23, in Genoni 2001:14) puts it, ‘the contours of culture and the terrain of the nation continue to be wrought in explorers’ tracks’ (p. 14). And the trope of exploration continues to have a hold on creative writers’ imagination. The most commonly cited use of the explorer trope in Australian fiction is *Voss*, says Genoni, valuing it as a ‘brilliant demonstration of the potential of the journey into the emptiness of the interior as the basis for an examination of the interior life of a character’ (2001:15). While Genoni

agrees with Lynch that the novel's primary focus is psychological, he does not judge it for being non-ecological.

With regard to *Tracks*, Christy Collis differs from Lynch in her use of the concept 'home', understanding it rather as the readership for whom Davidson writes. Collis (1997) poses two questions about the nature of Davidson's narrative:

First, when she walked and wrote her way over that final rise, what exactly did she enter? And second, as a post-colonial feminist, how does Davidson understand and produce Australian desert space? That is, how does Davidson write home? (p. 179)

Rather than expecting Davidson to try to settle in the desert, Collis recognises that she is concerned, in her memoir, to represent it. In her 'Postscript' to the 2012 edition, Davidson (2012) says, it had not been her intention to write a book, and remarks of the writing process:

An extraordinary feat of remembering took place, making the entire nine months, every single campsite during a 2000 km walk, limpid. But once the book was published, the memories began to fade, as if the book had stolen them. The real journey, who I was when I made it, all of it caved away, leaving behind a similitude called *Tracks* and some photographs of a young woman. (p. 1)

The real journey, in effect, becomes 'subsumed by its reconstructions' – the lived experience of the desert turns into her documentation of it. The desert is thus recast in her encounter with it, as a younger self for whom nothing was more important than exercising her right to freedom, to 'shed burdens', to 'pare away what was unnecessary' (Davidson 2012:251). In this regard, Lynch is right in emphasising the desert's value for Davidson as 'difference from familiar places' (2007:80). And, as Genoni puts it, in the journal the act of exploration is transformed into a text that recorded the land that was discovered, and recreated the experiences of travel and discovery (Genoni 2009:322). Collis also comments on Davidson's use of the trope of the explorer. She points out that Davidson is aware of and resists the 'devaluing' to which women's travel writing is typically subjected, and therefore couches her memoir deliberately as an exploration narrative. In doing so, she claims for it status as 'foundational, authorised, and authoritative'. As with the popular reception of traditional exploration narratives, Collis (1997) notes, 'there have been almost no questions as to the veracity of Davidson's narrative' (p. 181).

Collis's second question was, 'how does Davidson understand and produce Australian desert space?' While she does not make her home in the desert, she does render the desert as, in Lefebvre's term, a 'lived space', which her text 'produces, opens up and explores' (p. 180). It is this 'lived space' that Davidson 'writes home'. She writes her way 'beyond the myth of emptiness she has traversed', and positions herself 'not as a vertical observer, but as a participant, a component of active desert space', which itself becomes 'an animate being of which I was a part' (Davidson 1980:191). This reciprocity, this

interchange, this immersive experience is, as we will go on to show, most notable in her encounters with dirt.

The concepts of desert and oasis – a rich, fertile, naturally occurring space around water within an arid land – are opposed in the literatures from around the world. The concept of 'garden' is associated, by contrast, with cultivation, and, often, with colonisation. In an early reading of *Voss* in terms of the theme of completeness, Keith Garebian opposes the two concepts of 'the desert' and 'the garden' (1976–1977). In terms like Lynch's, he calls the desert through which Voss and his party journey a 'hell' which is 'apparently infinite in its power to reduce humans to impotence, despair and madness', and which is set in sharp contrast with the 'comparative Eden of the city-garden' they leave behind them (p. 558). Garebian sees 'the desert as most strongly associated with Voss; the garden with Laura' (p. 557), but also notes that 'both symbols are complementary, for they work together in a relationship that sharpens the radical theme of metaphysical completeness' (p. 558).

In her reflective 2006 'Return of the camel lady' Davidson complicates this opposition in more direct, less symbolic ways. It is true that, at times, Robyn finds the desert to be an 'obstacle to be overcome' and a 'hostile' place. After leaving Tempe, she remarks: 'the sand dragged at my feet [*and*] ... The stillness of the waves of sand seemed to stifle and suffocate me' (Davidson 1980:125); 'the desert oaks sighed and bent down ... as if trying to grab me' (p. 149). The moon is 'cold marble and cruel' (p. 149), and the desert is 'an evil whispering sea' (p. 151). Hostile as it is, it is invested with agency: the sand seems to deliberately hinder her progress and the 'desert oaks' and 'moon' are a threatening presence. And yet she also learns ways of being in it that challenge Lynch's claim about its value for Robyn being only as 'difference from familiar places'. In her later reflection, she notes how she 'recovered' the garden in the desert: 'The emptiness, so vast and frightening at first, turned into the original garden as soon as I learnt how to be in it' (Davidson 2006:1). With the help of her companion Eddie, a Pitjantjatjara elder who guides her through sacred country, Robyn learns, progressively, to value the details of the desert. Eddie's response to it inspires her and consolidates its value for her. As they venture towards Warburton, she notices how 'the special places we passed gave him a kind of energy, a joy, a belonging ... and the feeling began rubbing off on me'. Drawing on Eddie's insight Robyn begins to see how it all fits together, 'the land was not wild but tame, bountiful, benign, giving, as long as you knew how to see it, how to be part of it' (Davidson 1980:173).

It is also the case that the explorers in *Voss* find the desert forbidding and hostile. Unlike Robyn, they do not come to understand the desert through their guides, Dugald and Jackie. Nor, when Voss and his men encounter Aboriginal people on their way to 'eat the fruit of the bunya' (White 1957:210) can the explorers join them. Instead, Le Mesurier can only gaze at the 'dark trees [*that*] promised

paradise' (p. 210). Nevertheless, there are crucial moments in the novel when, as the men become receptive to it, they (and their readers) also 'recover the garden in the desert', experiencing the desert as beautiful and inspirational, even actively nurturant and sustaining.

As we will see in the commentary that follows, White's treatment of this shift involves embodiment or, as Bridget Grogan, in several studies, terms it, corporeality. In 'Resuscitating the Body: Corporeality in the Fiction of Patrick White' (Grogan 2012), she reads his work as 'morally charged allegories' (after Manfred Mackenzie, Grogan 2012:9), which emphasise the 'ethical necessity of accepting the flesh' and 'in their recuperation of abjected aspects of the self and society ... celebrat[e] ... sensual immersion in the landscape' (p. 4). In her view, this 'challenges the narcissism' that treats the self as 'a disembodied entity merely tied to, and thus always superior to, the material world' (p. 4). Nor does his focus on corporeality reflect a 'fascinated and dismissive disgust' (p. 9). Ultimately it 'promotes the ethical, metaphysical and ontological acceptance of the body' that 'incorporates its "others" and that extends into the physical world' (p. 9).

Around Christmas time, the men enter a valley of 'sculptural red rocks and tapestries of musical green' (White 1957:197), and the contrast of colours inspires festivity. Their environment is invested with human qualities: the river is 'shallow and emotional'; the 'breath' of the 'fleshy jasmine' entices them with 'platters of leaves [*which*] present gifts of moisture' (p. 195), and the 'bodies' of the trees, 'slowly succumb' to the 'arms' of the jasmine winding 'round and round' their 'limbs'. Nature is figured as agentic and embodied: reacting to the men in a strange mix of seduction and brutality.

When, later, the party finds shelter from a prolonged rainstorm in some caves, Turner remarks he would give anything for some greens, having subsisted so long on flour and meat. Palfreyman remembers he has with him seeds of mustard and cress, and conceives the idea of 'sowing a bed' for the men (p. 287). He goes out into the rain, and indeed finds a bed of silt in a pocket of rock. He sows, and the 'miraculous seeds germinate, standing up on pale threads, then unfolding' (pp. 287–288). Palfreyman thus generates a crop of greens (which is subsequently and secretly plundered by Voss), and in doing so transforms desert into garden. Once the rain clears, the desert generates its own greens: 'grass that stroked the horses' bellies' and parklands whose green 'sates' the eyes of the men. Again the land seems agentic: the men feel it is 'celebrating their important presence' and so they respond, singing 'like lovers or children' (p. 333) as they ride. The arrival of rain triggers the life hidden in the desert, and passages such as these show it to be a place of transient abundance, capable of supporting and nourishing life. Paradoxically though, as the land transforms, the men change too. The new vegetation brings plenty, but they have lost their desire for food (pp. 333–334); their stomachs have become 'wizened'. Unlike the 'muscular forms of cool,

smooth, flesh-coloured trees' (p. 333), their bodies now 'only remotely suggested flesh' (p. 334). As in the valley they found at Christmas, bodily form seems transposed between the men and the plants around them.

Of course, the desert shapes not only their bodies and appetites, but also their responses to it. As Genoni notes, Voss's attitude at the outset is sublime and transcendental, rather than materialistic and exploitative (2009:327). And so there are moments when the desert brings spiritual, even religious experience. Shortly after the party enter what is described as 'the approaches to hell', they wake to 'a bright cold dew upon the world'. Palfreyman finds Voss 'gathering the dew with a sponge and squeezing it into a quart'. He joins him at this 'work', and remarks, 'It could be idyllic if we were to keep our heads lowered, and concentrate our whole attention on these jewels'. Voss responds, 'This is the way, I understand, in which some people acquire religious faith' (pp. 338–339).

Transcendence is reflected, also, in a sequence of encounters with desert lilies. Earlier, before the party leave Potts Point, Voss finds Palfreyman working on a 'silvery sketch' of a lily. Palfreyman is enchanted by the flower and will not move 'for fear of breaking the spell' (White 1957:187). Voss remarks, dismissively, 'it may be very common'. Yet when he falls asleep it is the lily that brings him and Laura together in a powerfully symbolic dream:

[T]he words of lilies were now flowing in full summer water ... Now they were swimming so close they were joined together, at the waist, and were the same flesh as lilies. (White 1957:187)

Again, plants are embodied, but this time they are engendered out of conjoined humans' flesh. Voss's dream dissolves the boundary between him and the vegetation around him while symbolically consummating his relationship with Laura. The night before Jackie murders him, the lilies appear to Voss in another dream. With Laura by his side, he witnesses the desert present itself through the lilies as nourishment and as sacrament:

Upon the banks of a transparent river ... they dismounted to pick the lilies that were growing there. They were the prayers, she said, which she had let fall during the outward journey to his coronation, and which ... had sprung up as food to tide them over ... But of greater importance were his own words of love that he was at last able to put into her mouth. So great was her faith, she received these white wafers without surprise. (White 1957: 392)

The desert lilies, emanating from the desert dirt, first inspire Voss's dream of the consummation of his relationship with Laura; then become her prayers which generate nourishing food; and finally are words of love, which Voss, humbled at last, delivers into Laura's mouth as sacramental 'white wafers'. These fruits of the desert are spiritualised, and the lovers' communion celebrates the mystical erasure of the boundary between humans and the natural world around them. The conceptual and corporeal boundary between the men and their environment thus shifts and fades in their interaction with it. As Palfreyman works the dirt, it offers up a garden of mustard and cress in return. With rain it generates grass and parklands,

which saturate their vision and celebrate their presence, and bring them joy. The embodiment of desert vegetation, in contrast with the men's physical etiolation, sees a transposition of corporeality between them. And Voss's dreams of the lilies signal his transport into a desert paradise very different to the desert of 'hatred' and 'isolation' that Laura first imagined.

Robert Clarke (2015) compares Davidson's *Tracks* with Bruce Chatwin's *The Songlines*, arguing that both writers 'exploit the exoticism of Indigenous culture' and, despite asserting anti-colonial sentiments and showing sympathy to Aboriginal people, still 'appropriate Aboriginality in ambivalent ways' (p. 48). Since it was written in the 1970s, the cultural sensitivities revealed in the book may well seem out of kilter with current notions about ethical representation. In her 2012 Postscript, written some 40 years later, Davidson acknowledges the issue, saying she hopes it was not presumptuous to imagine her connection with the desert was like that of Eddie and that of the Aboriginal people. Certainly, the terms of her representation – her diction, her conceptualisation – owe much to a western mindset. Robyn distinguishes herself as 'a traveller' from the other tourists that flock in their multitudes to Uluru and plague her at times during her journey. However, the Great Uluru manages to resist the incessant capture of the tourists' cameras. Robyn admits:

The Rock did not disappoint me, far from it. All the tourists in the world could not destroy it, it was too immense, too forceful, too ancient to be corruptible. (Davidson 1980:131)

Despite her pretensions, Davidson too is an outsider to the area, and Aboriginal culture, although a large part of her narrative sympathises with the relegated state of Aboriginal people in Australia. Some critics have praised her awareness of the tensions inherent in her traversal of central Australia, such as Beck (2016) who contends that:

[o]ne of her main preoccupations in the book is to re-access Aboriginal history and its legacies, and she does that not only by resisting imperial white Australian racist views of Aborigines, but also by recovering Aboriginal knowledge and their ties to the Australian land. (p. 94)

And yet the encounter between human and desert that saw conceptual and corporeal boundaries shift and fade in *Voss* is enacted in *Tracks* in even more direct and immediate ways. Having gained new sensitivities through Eddie, Robyn walks along the Gunbarrel Highway of the Gibson Desert and reflects that 'capacity for survival may be the ability to be changed by environment', to lose this 'fragmentation' between it and the self. She remarks, 'when you walk on, sleep on, stand on, defecate on, wallow in, get covered in, and eat the dirt around you' (Davidson 1980:193), a rapport is built, and the 'self in the desert becomes more and more like the desert' (p. 192). Camping in a dust bowl under some straggly trees, Robyn unhitches the camels that begin to play and roll in the dirt. She throws off her clothes and joins them. Covered in 'thick caked orange dust' and with 'matted hair'

she reflects, 'it was the most honest hour of unselfconscious fun I had ever had' (p. 196).

This integration is briefly reversed when, after Eddie leaves, she loses her dog Diggity to strychnine bait. In her grief, the next 10 days pass by in a 'timeless blur'. The landscape she encounters is surreal, with 'cliffs of every imaginable hue', and without Diggity 'even this walk felt empty' (p. 229). The desert has become again hostile, an 'obstacle' to be overcome. And then another encounter with dirt restores her. She finds a landscape of claypans where, in the open space, she can release her grief:

Mile after mile these perfectly flat ... hard-baked Euclidean surfaces ran ... without a tree or an animal or a clump of spinifex – nothing but towering, thin, crooked, ... pillars of whirling dust being sucked up into a burning ... white sky. (Davidson 1980:230)

She ties up the camels for their break, and then takes off her clothes and dances in that 'searing, clean ... dry heat', that 'bush ballroom', like a dervish, howling and shouting until exhausted, covered in 'grime and sweat, shaking with fatigue, dust in [her] ears and nose and mouth' she falls asleep (p. 230). When she wakes up, she feels weightless and healed. Her immersion in the dirt of the desert serves as a kind of communion with it that brings her physical and spiritual release.

Having embraced dirt, having merged with it, Robyn finds a place for herself in the complex network of fauna and flora she recognised earlier, allowing herself to be 'caught up' in its patterns. Thus, passing through the Gibson Desert during a drought she yet finds it rich with life, with plenty of grazing for her camels. Her connection with the living world of the desert is reinforced by contrast when, in the last stretches of her journey she reaches Carnegie and the first fence that signals pastoral land. Here, she says:

[T]he real desert [began] – a dust bowl full of dead and dying bullocks, and no ground cover except for poisonous turpentine bush. That boundary fence marked the most depressing transition in the whole journey. (Davidson 2012:252)

In this instance other humans' agricultural and commercial interaction with their environment has 'broken' the country (Davidson 1980:210).

A significant encounter with dirt occurs in *Voss*, too, when the men are seen by a group of Aboriginal women digging for yams. Where ordinarily the women would run screaming from the sight of European men, what they see is not men but dirt: the men are not threatening to them because they are 'caked and matted' in mud, dust and dirt, and their smell comes from the mud and not from their bodies. Unlike Robyn's immersion, theirs is incomplete. As the women look more closely, they see the men's eyes are 'dried pools' and they are 'too obsessed by their dream of distance and the future' to notice what is around them. Not seeing the women, the men only glance at them 'as they would crevices in hot, black rock' (White 1957:241), as if it is the women and not themselves who have merged with

their environment. Of course, the representation of this encounter is focalised not by the ones experiencing it, as was the case with Robyn. Nevertheless, the encounter instantiates the power of the desert to recast the men's identity, to dispel the boundary between human form and the fundamental element of dirt.

Voss's and Robyn's experiences clearly differ: separated by time, motivations and attitudes towards their companions, the traversal narratives in which they are located represent their desert environments quite differently. What is common, however, is how fundamentally their 'journeys into dirt' alter and affect them. While Lynch reads these traversal narratives as configuring the desert as obstacle to be overcome, as portraying deserts as hostile voids, these characters' encounters with dirt are in fact transformative, illustrating the interconnectedness we as humans have with our elemental environment, with the soil. While Garebian sets in opposition the 'hellish' desert through which Voss and his party journey and the Edenic city-garden they leave behind, as Genoni has indicated Voss's motivation is transcendent, and the sublime experiences he and his men go through in the desert help to characterise it also as nurturant and inspiring. Especially the bodily transpositions that occur at certain points in the narrative reveal the men's reconfiguration as elemental parts, themselves, of the desert world. Most comprehensive, though, is Robyn's immersion of herself in the dirt of the dust-bowl and the 'dust ballroom' she finds – integrating herself with the desert, and restoring herself from blurred grief to equanimity and healing. Neither desert becomes enduring home to those traversing it; but their encounters in it and with it lend credence to the dissolution of the boundary between human and dirt that Sullivan's theory proposed.

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