

EXERCISING DOMINION: LANDSCAPE, CIVILISATION AND RACIAL POLITICS IN *CAPRICORNIA*

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Abstract

The Land in Xavier Herbert's 1937 novel *Capricornia* acts as a "medium" (38), according to Lydia Wevers, mediating all experiences and developments. In particular, the land is a site of contention between Indigenous and settler groups each vying for an existence very different from the other's. The phrase "exercising dominion" (Fitzmaurice 56) was developed by European thinkers in the Middle Ages, who were tasked with finding justification for the colonisation of the Holy Lands of the Middle East and the mineral-rich lands of the Americas. This article will analyse the settlement and colonisation of the Northern Territory as depicted in *Capricornia* with consideration of the above statement, particularly as it explores the opposing groups' attitudes towards and interactions with the Land and each other.

Keywords: Landscape; Indigenous; Settler; Colonial; Colonisation

Introduction

Xavier Herbert's *Capricornia* is an epic novel, which takes as its subject the settlement and colonisation of the Northern Territory of Australia. In its fictional depiction of these events, it nonetheless employs a sense of historical verisimilitude that presents a fatalistic vision of race relations in the early settlement. As such, the novel depicts the initial violence and continuing hostilities between British settlers and the Indigenous peoples of the region. The most notable facet of the novel, however, is the depiction of a social hierarchy of race evident in the region. Written with the intention of informing urban Australians of the "frontier realities, especially the continuing sexual exploitation of Aboriginal women" (McDougall), *Capricornia* "can be read as a scathing critique of the brutalising contempt for Aboriginal inheritance, family, belonging, and culture, demonstrated in white/black relations" (Jose, 449). Whilst ultimately addressing this reading of the novel,

this article will focus equally upon the presentation of landscape, specifically its value to both settler and Indigenous peoples; its curious, seemingly willful ability to attain balance through what Herbert names as "the Spirit of the Land" (293); and the hostilities that arise from the settlers' inability to understand the value Indigenous people place upon land. Between the two opposing racial groups present in Indigenous peoples and British settlers in the novel, there emerges a distinct ideological difference in the consideration and treatment of the landscape. Indigenous Australians observe the landscape as homely and familial, and have a reverence for the land's power and ability to sustain their existence and its own. Settler groups however appear to observe the land purely as a means of economic benefit to themselves, commoditising the landscape and its attributes—in accordance with colonial prerogatives—with regards to "improving" the landscape. Between these competing ideologies emerges Norman Shillingsworth, the son of Mark Shillingsworth—a

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settler—and an Indigenous mother. Norman’s ability to embrace both these ideologies, this article will argue, indicates Herbert’s view of the importance for a unified Australian society, which values Indigenous and settler ideologies equally.

1 The land

The fictionalised territory of *Capricornia* covers the most North-Western point of the Australian continent, roughly from the harbour settlement of Port Zodiac (Darwin) to Melisande (Katherine) in the interior, a distance, Herbert denotes on the map accompanying the novel of “about 200 miles”. The vastness of the region is further emphasised in the description that: “Capricornia covered an area of about half a million square miles” (2). Despite the immensity of the region, life and the prospects of settlement remain precarious in the face of “extremes of heat and humidity” (14), where “the whole vast territory seemed never to be anything for long but either a swamp during Wet Season or a hard-baked desert during the Dry” (2). The cycle between the Dry and Wet Seasons is a dominant, recurring theme in *Capricornia*—a land of extremes—where work cannot be completed in the Wet season for fear of floods washing away any accomplishments, and in the Dry, the landscape becomes almost inhospitable, threatening drought and death to livestock. Through this strange cycle though, the landscape achieves balance, retaining the ability to sustain life, and even to exhibit immense bounty and immense beauty. The land’s bounty is expressed when Herbert introduces Marowallua—the mother of Norman Shillingsworth—living in tribal conditions adjacent to Ned Krater’s trepang-fishing camp. Herbert writes:

The humpies were set up on the isthmus between the creek and the sea, among a grove of fine old mango trees ... In these trees lived a multitude of the great black bats called flying foxes ... Back some little distance from the settlement lay a large billabong [...] The billabong provided much of the food of the inhabitants. Yams and lily-roots grew there in abundance; and it was the haunt of duck and

geese, and a drinking-place of the marsupials with which, thanks to Krater’s good sense in helping the natives to preserve the game, the island abounded. More food was to be got from the mainland, where now there were to be found wild hog and water-buffalo, beasts descended from imported stock that had escaped from domesticity. And still more food was to be got from the sea, which abounded in turtle and dugong and fish. (22)

“Nature is grand,” notes Lydia Wevers, “but seldom sublime in *Capricornia*,” (39) since it is more often than not prone to violence and extremity, at once peaceful but also harsh and unforgiving, seemingly resisting—in the same manner the Indigenous people resist—Civilisation’s arrival to the land. In these episodes, Herbert imbues the land with a curious agency which makes dominion over the landscape seemingly impossible.

The landscape is also abundant in economic resources, which attracts the British settlers, with gold being discovered in the early settlement and the huge potential for generating power evident in the region’s chief river, the Melisande, which is finally harnessed by a hydro-electric plant Mark Shillingsworth had initially and fruitlessly erected for the property he and his brother owned at Red Ochre (46). In this sense, *Capricornia* is a landscape of hidden abundance available to those ingenious or stubborn enough to harness it.

2 Indigenous mode of existence

To understand our law, our culture and our relationship to the physical and spiritual world, you must begin with the land. Everything about Aboriginal society is inextricably woven with, and connected to, the land. Culture is the land, the land and spirituality of Aboriginal people, our cultural beliefs or reason for existence is the land. You take that away and you take away our reason for existence. We have grown the land up. We are dancing, singing and painting for the land. We are celebrating the land. Removed from our lands, we are literally removed from ourselves. (Dodson, 41)

The Indigenous peoples of *Capricornia*, as with all Aboriginal Australian tribes, subsisted on the bounty of the landscape. As one Indigenous character by the

moniker of “Bootpolish” (306) states: “Proper good country dis one [...] plenty ebrhythings [sic]” (307). Whilst living with an Indigenous tribe in Northern Australia, the anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner observed that: “The Aborigines rarely starve, but they go short more often than might be supposed when the substantial fauna [...] are too elusive” (25). The Indigenous mode of existence, however, is adaptational, developed to deal with the harshness, immensity and turbulence of the landscape, a fact Herbert alludes to in detailing that the first six attempts at establishing a British settlement in Capricornia were thwarted either by the flooding of the Wet season, or the harsh barrenness of the Dry season. Regardless, the Indigenous population thrive in the landscape. Those places perceived by settlers to be the most fertile actually proved the most unsuitable to settlement, experiencing “a good eighty inches of rain” (Herbert 2) in the few months at the peak of the Wet Season and “during the seven months of normal Dry Season, never did a drop of rain fall and rarely did a cloud appear” (2). Wevers argues: “the Binghi¹ are the only characters who are represented as quite free in and untroubled by the physical landscape” (40). This, undoubtedly, is a demonstration of the Indigenous population’s deep connection to the landscape and the understanding they subsequently possess of it due to this deep connection. What settlers deem as a primitive, nomadic hunter-gatherer existence led by Indigenous Australians in the novel actually appears best suited to a landscape where cultivated crops would be at risk of either desiccation or being washed away and livestock would face much the same fate.² The Indigenous mode of existence, however, extends far beyond mere adaptation to the hardships thrust upon them by the land. A complex system of spiritual beliefs and connections interweave the lives of Indigenous people with the landscape. Stanner noted that: “The Aboriginal would speak of ‘earth’ and use the word in a richly symbolic way to mean his ‘shoulder’ or his ‘side.’ I have seen an Aborigine embrace the earth he walked on” (Stanner 9). The ancestral land of an Indigenous tribe is at once their relative, their self, their being, and their identity (Watson 39). The land contains stories relating the laws and connections of and for the inhabitants. In essence

then, written into the landscape is the entire cultural and spiritual fabric of individual Indigenous tribes. It follows that Indigenous Australians have a deep and intimate connection to the landscape that enfolds the entirety of their being, their understanding of and their relationship to the greater world. Because the landscape is “alive” with the spirits of relatives, Indigenous tribes entrust themselves with the “care” of their country, as Watson writes:

The ethic of caring for country encompasses a relationship to ruwi.³ The land is a relation: a mother, father, grandmother, grandfather. It is where we have trekked from in the past, what we stand on today, and that which allows us to connect with tomorrow. That is the dream or vision, a seemingly impossible ideal for the future. (Watson 41)

In the effort of settlement and colonisation, the Indigenous connection to land was misinterpreted and misrepresented, as Watson writes: “Aboriginal ... relationships to country did not fit Western ideas of progress” (41). This miscomprehension of the intricacy and complexity of Indigenous Australian’s intimate relationship to the land is addressed throughout *Capricornia*—mostly in perjorative comments and a general conception displayed by settlers of Indigeneity being primitive—one key episode of which I will now examine.

One of the chief protagonists of the novel, Mark Shillingsworth, develops a newfound appreciation of Indigenous peoples and their culture when he encounters a tribe living traditionally whilst on a fishing trip. As he examines their commodities—“a pile of fine arms and accoutrements, fine pieces of work, elaborately shaped and carved and painted, wrought presumably with primitive tools and the coarse pigments of the earth” (16)—he notices the “strikingly intricate and beautiful” craftwork and the ingenuity of these people creating such elaborate items from such meagre resources. This observation belies what Mark had previously been taught of Indigenous Australians and their capacities: “He was surprised, having been taught to regard his black compatriots as extremely low creatures, the very

rag-tag of humanity, scarcely more intelligent and handy than apes” (Herbert 16). Mark’s revelation of the Indigenous capability and genius speaks volumes of the treatment of Indigenous Australian peoples by white settlers. With the settler population exhibiting a disregard for the Indigenous population that is born largely from ignorance and misapprehensions of their own superiority, the novel mirrors popular opinions of the inferiority of Indigenous Australians that abounded in the nineteenth and earlier twentieth Century, such as that of D. Macallister, writing in “The Australian Aborigines” (1878), who stated:

As a people, they bordered most nearly on the verge of animalism, “occupying,” [...] “the lowest step on the human ladder;” and, moreover, as a people, they will soon have ceased to exist, being destined seemingly to sink in the struggle of races, almost, if not altogether, unable to make any efforts for their own perpetuation. (Reynolds 120-121)

Mark Shillingsworth finds—in his first encounter with a proud Indigenous tribe—the fallacy of inherent racial superiority possessed by British settlers. While the novel echoes the sentiments of many contemporaneous proponents who argued the Indigenous peoples of Australia were inferior to British colonisers because “for thousands of years ... [they] have died without leaving any buildings, gardens, farms or erections of a permanent character” (Reynolds 126), Mark finds the Indigenous culture to be far more impressive than one equated with a race “scarcely more intelligent and handy than the apes” (Herbert 16). Mark is also impressed by the natural beauty of the Indigenous women:

One who was observant and aesthetic would have gloated over the perfect symmetry expressed in the curves of the wide mobile nostrils and arched septum of the fleshy nose, would have delighted in her peculiar pouting mouth with thick puckered lips of colour reddish black like withered rose, in the lustrous irises and fleckless white-of-egg-white whites of her large black slightly-tilted eyes [...]. (17)

Mark ultimately overcomes the socially-ingrained thinking that he should not see “beauty in a creature of a type he had been taught to look upon as a travesty of normal humanity” (17), and instead, reasons “[why] would the Lord God who put some kind of beauty into the faces of every other kind of woman utterly ignore this one?” (17). Most importantly, Mark recognises that the natural beauty of this Indigenous tribeswoman is in stark contrast to his “half-starved housemaid” (17) who had been dispossessed of her traditional existence and is now reliant upon Civilisation. Fed primarily on “scraps” (17), the Shillingsworths’ Indigenous housemaid fits that of “the detribalised and semi-civilised natives” Stanner argues are “badly undernourished, and to be living precariously from hand to mouth on what in many cases is a wretchedly inferior diet” (Stanner, “Aborigines”, 130). Any official rations issued “consist of little white flour, and small quantities of polished rice, tea, sugar and tobacco [...] intended only to supplement the food gathered by natives in their traditional hunting way” (“Aborigines”, 131). The diets of detribalised Indigenous peoples were therefore fiercely inadequate, because dispossession had forced them into a position of alterity in the settlement, where they worked for the meagre staples and meagre wages offered by white employers and had little ability to hunt to supplement their diet. Add to that Herbert’s indication that “fish and game were scarce” (7) since the colonisation of the Europeans, and one can imagine the reliance of detribalised Indigenous peoples upon whatever food they could obtain from the colonisers. So, while the detribalised Indigenous population now living on the fringes of and working within the settlement of Port Zodiac are subsisting on diets “short of essential proteins, fats, mineral salts, and vitamins” (Stanner, “Aborigines”, 130), Herbert presents in the episode of Mark’s first encounter with an Indigenous tribe, a vision of a proud, autonomous Indigenous population thriving in tribal conditions with “the Spirit of the Land” (293). Indigenous peoples are inherently capable of making the most of what the land offers them, until these resources or the land itself was made unavailable to them by the encroachment of settler society. The over-arching observation of Indigeneity in

the novel one can make then is that it thrives away from the destructive influences of settler society that indeed settler society only breeds chaos and vice.

3 Settler existence and the commoditisation of the land

The mode of existence exhibited by British settlers in *Capricornia* starkly contrasts with the display of a deep spiritual and familial connection Indigenous cultures retain with the land. From an ideological perspective, it appears that the settlers of *Capricornia* are concerned with land possession purely for the purpose of economic betterment and have little regard for any emotional connection to the landscape. This, I suggest, aligns with the ideology that led to the development of European colonies around the world.

In his essay “Anticolonialism in Western Political Thought: The Colonial Origins of the Concept of Genocide”, Andrew Fitzmaurice explores the history of philosophical thinking that has accompanied the Western world’s violent incursions into the domains of the Indigenous New World. Fitzmaurice describes the justification of the English settlement of North America, quoting renowned Enlightenment poet John Donne’s sermon to the Virginia company:

In the law of Nature and Nations, a land never inhabited, by any, or utterly derelicted and immemorially abandoned by the former Inhabitants, becomes theirs that will possesse [sic] it. So also is it, if the inhabitants doe [sic] not in some measure fill the Land, so as the Land may bring forth her increase for the use of men. (63)

Donne sets out two criteria in the above text: 1. that a land uninhabited or treated as if it were uninhabited may pass to anyone who decides to inhabit it; and 2. that the potential of the land must be increased by the inhabitants. The first criterion however sets parameters for the second. It suggests a habited land cannot be left natural, untouched, serene in appearance, and in conjunction with the second criterion, one must only presume that the land’s “potential” can only be

concerned with European conceptions of development and civilisation. One can observe in these philosophical imperatives of European incursions into the New World a clear correlation to the intentions of colonists centuries later seeking to establish a British colony on the Australian continent. *Capricornia* represents the colonial dictum of improving the land as one driven entirely towards fulfilling the economic potential of the landscape and increasing the land owner’s prosperity, which directly threatens Indigineity. One can see this is certainly the case for the early pioneering settler, Captain Edward Krater, and his violent disregard for the Indigenous population and “the Spirit of the Land” (293).

Being the first individual settler to branch out from the Port Zodiac settlement, Krater’s ambitions are economic and as such, clinical in their employment. The Indigenous tribes to the east of Port Zodiac, having, as Herbert writes “heard tell of the invaders from survivors of the neighbouring tribe of Karrapillua, [and had consequently] come to regard whitemen as rather creatures of legend, or perhaps more rightly as monsters of legend, since they had heard enough about them to fear them greatly” (3). Krater lives up to this monster of legend label, pursuing the establishment of his trepang fishing camp with an absolute display of force:

Ned Krater wished to establish a base [...] on a certain little island belonging to the Yurracumbungas and called by them Arrikitarriyah or the Gift of the Sea ... He was standing on the deck in all his golden glory. [The Yurracumbungas] snatched up their arms and flew to cover. One of Krater’s crew, who were natives of the Tikkalalla Islands and old enemies of the Yurracumbungas, told the ambuscade at the top of his voice who Krater was and what would happen if it was with hostile intent that they hid, then took up a rifle and with a volley of shots set the echoes ringing and the cockatoos yelling and the hearts of the Yurracumbungas quaking. Krater then went ashore. (3-4)

The brash assuredness of Krater’s arrival can be read as an allegory of the arrival of all British colonists in Australia. The fiercesome awe of magnificent tall-ships appearing on the coastline. The echoing crack of rifles.

The extravagance of dress. European arrival must have been as theatrical to the Indigenous peoples as the narrator describes in Krater's arrival on Arrikitariyah.

Krater immediately settles the site of Arrikitariyah, pitching his tent directly amongst the Yurracumbungas' gunyahs,⁴ in a gesture indicative of an assumed superiority. Krater's party's immense technological advantage over that of the Indigenous peoples immediately disrupts their traditional living, as they observe: "How could one ever boast again of prowess with spear and kylie⁵ after having seen what could be done with rifle and dynamite?" (4). An amicable mutual cohabitation then ensues, with the Yurracumbungas assuming the whitemen "were not mere raiders like the brownmen who used sometimes to come to them from the North, but supermen who had come to stay and rule" (4). Thus, the Yurracumbungas cruelly see Krater's arrival as a great opportunity for them, as Herbert writes: "Far from hating the invader, the Yurracumbungas welcomed him, thinking that he would become one of them and teach them his magic arts" (4). The reality, however, is that Krater intends to be both a ruler and a raider. His intent is to pursue his own betterment with complete disregard for the impact his activities have on the welcoming Indigenous population. Because of his disregard for the Yurracumbungas, Krater fails to understand the complex tribal laws under which they live. Not only is Krater ignorant of said laws, but his brashness and assurance of his racial superiority leads him to a belief in the entitlement of himself and his men to whatever belongs to the Yurracumbunga, because he is using the land and to his mind, achieving its potential. Krater's "black crew" acknowledge the indelible change: "The islanders said that the old order had passed; and to prove it, one of them seized a lubra⁶ and ravaged her" (5). Krater's support of his men's desecration of tribal laws marks the death knell for amicable cohabitation between himself and the Yurracumbunga, since it demonstrates the true nature of Krater and the threat he poses to the tribe's way of life. This prompts an attempted assassination of Krater, which, upon its failure, leads to a savage retaliation by Krater and his men. Impalui, the man accompanying Kurrinua to assassinate Krater, accidentally fires his stolen rifle,

shattering Kurrinua's thigh bone with the shot. A volley of violence ensues from both sides: "Uproar! Spears whizzed. Rifles crashed. Men roared and howled. The horde rushed, fought fiercely for a moment, wavered, turned and fled" (Herbert 6). The narration of the retribution that followed the assassination attempt on Krater demonstrates the observation of Indigenous peoples as subordinate and inhuman by white settlers. Key nouns such as "horde", employed to describe the attacking collective of Indigenous men, conjures images of a disorganised, militaristic group of savages, i.e. the Mongols; or even: a "large, moving mass of animals" (<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/horde>). The motif of representing the Indigenous population as animals continues in this passage, where the injured formerly proud Kurrinua is described as "sprawling about like a landed devil-fish" (6), and having "rolled over and over like a sea-urchin in a gale" (6) whilst attempting to escape his pursuants. G. S. Lang, a nineteenth century observer of colonial advance, notes that white settlement regularly followed this model of regarding Indigenous peoples as "fauna," Lang noted, continuing to argue: "the country having been occupied by the white settlers with as utter a disregard of their interests, rights and even subsistence, as if they had been wild dogs or kangaroos" (Reynolds 4). This was a direct result of the pseudo-legal argument European civilisations had adopted in order to legitimise their expeditions into lands held by Indigenous peoples: "hunter-gatherers stood at the bottom of human social evolution because they did not fulfill their human potential by cultivating the land" (Moses 12). As Moses continues: "On the basis of these assumptions, the British argued the 'natives' had rights only to what they caught and gathered, while uncultivated land belonged to no one (*res nullius*), and was therefore available to Europeans to settle and exploit" (13). Such beliefs stemmed from the philosophical work of sixteenth century scholars such as Thomas Aquinas, who, in attempting to justify a Christian invasion of the Muslim-held Holy Land "used natural law to argue that property is based on the use of reason" (Fitzmaurice 56). "Exercising dominion" (Fitzmaurice, 56) over the land became the preeminent consideration of European scholars who were attempting

to establish what constituted possession by Indigenous peoples. Unfortunately, for many Indigenous peoples—such as the Yurracumbunga—who faced European invasion and colonisation, the perception of “exercising dominion” (Fitzmaurice 56) was entirely Eurocentric and as such, ignorant of the complexity and profundity of Indigenous peoples’ relationship to their native landscape. In *Capricornia*, Krater’s establishment of a camp on the Yurracumbungas’ corroboree⁷ grounds, something he is unaware of perhaps because he is looking for familiar, European symbols of spiritual relevance, such as an organised site of worship, e.g. a Church or temple, when the Yurracumbungas’ spiritual beliefs entail that the land is a church and spiritual centres are thus omnipresent. Krater’s utter disregard for Indigenous life is mirrored in Edward Curr’s true encounters of the British settlement and colonisation of Australia in 1886, which demonstrates the value of Herbert’s account of Krater’s possession of the Yurracumbunga land. Curr noted that:

The White man looks on the possession of the lands by the Blacks as no proper occupation, and practically and avowedly declines to allow them the common rights of human beings. On the other hand, the tribe which has held its land from time immemorial and always maintained, according to native policy, the unauthorised digging up of one root on its soil to be a *casus belli*,⁸ suddenly finds not only that strangers of another race have located themselves permanently on their lands, but that they have brought with them a multitude of animals, which devour wholesale the roots and vegetables which constitute their principal food, and drive off the game they formerly hunted. (Reynolds, 2)

Indeed, *Capricornia* suggests that the colonising British believed their social and cultural structures to be so superior that they would not even be deterred by the forces of nature: “When New Westminster was for the third time swept into the Silver Sea by the floods of the generous Wet Season, the pioneers abandoned the site to the crocodiles and jabirooms and devil-crabs, and went in search of a better” (1-2). Three later settlements were to be abandoned for the same reason

as New Westminster, and the settlement verged on futility, “as all these fertile places were low-lying, it was obviously impossible to settle on them permanently” (2). An obvious irony appears whereby the settlers who deemed the Indigenous population as not having any legal claim to the land due to their lack of development of it are themselves proven incapable of developing the land in a permanent or productive manner. Hence, the Indigenous mode of existence appears all the more appropriate and ingenious for the repeated failures of British settlers to manipulate the land to suit their mode of existence. Though the settlers’ appreciable technological advantage and dogged persistence finally allow them to establish a stable settlement at Port Zodiac thanks, in part to the impetus provided by the discovery of gold in the region.

Following the establishment of Port Zodiac, the novel offers a vision of the dire predicament of the remaining Indigenous population of the region after treatment by such violent entrepreneurs as Krater. Amongst this backdrop of Indigenous suffering, Herbert introduces his chief protagonists, Oscar and Mark Shillingsworth. Oscar and Mark Shillingsworth are brothers of substance, having lived comfortably as clerks in the city of “Batman” (8) [a pseudonym for Melbourne] prior to their venture to the north. The two are hardly in the mold of the typical pioneer of Australian folklore; instead they belong to the second or third wave of migrants to a newly-founded settlement, lusting after the potential of finding themselves a fortune in this new land. The two arrive in Port Zodiac, only once the region has already achieved an “advanced state of Civilisation” (7). Herbert’s satirical wit comes through in this line, with the implication that the idea of planting civilisation entails the erasure of the Indigenous population; and that counter to the popular perception of settler pastoralists taming the landscape, pastoralists such as Oscar and Mark Shillingsworth often arrived once the hard work of settlement was already completed by the violent hands of rogues such as Krater.

After a couple of years working as officers of the Capricornian Government Service, the brothers resign. Oscar becomes a grazier upon the Red Ochre station, which his wife, Jasmine, has inherited. Mark, on the other hand, follows a now aging Ned Krater in

his trepan fishing venture and fathers an illegitimate son to an Aboriginal woman. Mark largely disappears from the narrative after this separation with his brother and, due to his developing alcoholism, poor health and reckless spirit, he has nothing to do with his son's early life. Oscar is meanwhile driven by a lust for power and financial gain. At one point when the cattle market reaches an unprecedented decline—demonstrating that Civilisation too is as unpredictable as “the Spirit of the Land” (293)—he abandons Red Ochre for the financial stability of the south, before returning twelve years later when beef prices have risen sky-high. In this account then, neither Oscar nor Mark appear to foster a sense of homeliness towards Capricornia. Despite their experiences in the landscape, it is viewed as little more than a means of making a fortune, as one can identify from their immediate introduction: the brothers were “hopeful [...] of improving their lot by coming so far from home [Batman],” even though “they had no idea of what opportunities were offering in this new sphere till they landed” (Herbert 8).

4 Norman Shillingsworth and the hope of a unified Australia

“By the late 18th Century it was increasingly common to place the various ‘races’ in hierarchical order with northern Europeans taking up the number one position” (107). The hierarchical order was established through now defunct sciences such as phrenology, which established a broad social thinking that Indigenous Australians were innately inferior to northern Europeans.

As the illegitimate son of Mark and Marowallua, Norman Shillingsworth's youth is a pitiable one. As what Herbert refers to as a “half-caste” [born of one white and one black parent], he is essentially excluded from both societies. “The blackfellow does not care for the half-caste;” observes contemporaneous writer W. E. Dalton, “nor does the white man” (Reynolds 65). At the time *Capricornia* was written, mixed-race people occupied a position of spectrality in the nation: nearly invisible both in the tribe to which their mother belongs, and equally transparent in the society of their

father. Such is the position Norman finds himself in, initially being given the name “Naw-nim” (40) by the Indigenous tribe his mother belonged to, because it “was their way of saying No-name” (40). “The name No-name was one usually given by the natives to dogs for which they had no love but had not the heart to kill or lose. It was often given to half-castes as well,” (40) writes Herbert, illuminating the fierce ostracisation of mixed-race individuals amidst Indigenous tribes. Mark, too, has apprehensions about his begotten son, thinking that Norman had likely died during his nine months absence. Whilst not an absurd assumption given the mortality rate of newborn Indigenous children in the Australia of the early 1900s, this also indicates a desire for the burdensome child to no longer exist.

After the death of his mother, Norman is shuffled around amongst a number of pseudo-carers, while he is largely neglected by his father. Then, by a series of unusual events, Norman comes into the care of Oscar. At first, Oscar demonstrates the same reluctance as all previous carers to care for Norman. What alters Oscar's perception of the young Norman is a discussion with Peter Differ, the father of Constance Differ—a fellow “half-caste” that Peter holds great aspirations for.

Oscar, in conversation with Peter, indicates that he desires to send Norman to “the [Native] Compound” (78). Peter then attempts, staunchly, to dissuade him: “You can do as much good with a halfcaste as a white” (78). Oscar remains resolute in his belief that regardless of education, “the stigma of the Binghi blood'll always be on her [Connie]” (78). Then Peter offers the answer that he intends to disguise Constance's true race after moving south: “I'll pretend she's a halfcaste of another race—Javanese or some such race that the mob doesn't know much about and therefore'll respect” (78-9). Peter's thinking is that if people do not recognise Constance as an Indigenous person, she could escape the racial persecution she suffers in Capricornia. This thought appears to foster in Oscar a new realisation of what Norman can be. By another curious twist of fate, Norman is again thrust into Oscar's care when he attempts to admit the boy into the Native Compound days later only to be turned away due to an outbreak of measles amongst the inhabitants. After this, however,

Oscar “civilises” Norman, purchasing “him a tusser-silk suit and sandals and a sailor hat” (86). In this way, the narrator states: “A mighty improvement was effected in the child’s appearance,” (86) and as a result, Oscar is not as ashamed to be seen in town with Norman in tow. Upon returning to Red Ochre, Oscar grants Nawnim “the respectable name of Norman” and thus invites him into the “household as a Shillingsworth of the blood” (88).

While in town awaiting the departure of their vessel to Batman not long after the discussion with Differ, Oscar begins to introduce Norman as “the son of Mark’s high-caste Javanese wife,” borrowing the lie that Peter Differ had wished for his own daughter to live under, “since it saved him from suffering more tears and talk of the folly of [his] little brother” (130-131). This lie reveals a wish in Oscar that both he and the boy be spared of the racial politics, as well as a wish to relieve the burden the perceived stain of Indigenous ethnicity was seen as in the region and time. Therefore, the masquerading of Norman’s ethnicity as mixed European and Javanese is the only means by which Oscar can envisage Norman being able to participate in Capricornian/Australian society as a respectable member with the same access to educational and occupational opportunities as a white person. Peter Differ elaborates upon this social exclusion of Indigenous individuals during his argument with Oscar about keeping Norman out of the Native Compound: “Don’t send the kid to the Compound, Oscar. It’ll mean the ruin of him. He’ll grow up to learn nothing but humility [...]. Think of the life before the kid [...] Life-long humiliation. Neither a whiteman nor a black. A drifting nothing” (83). So, Oscar’s lie in effect frees Norman from a probable life of abjection as a “half-caste”.

Returning to Red Ochre after receiving an education in the south, Norman soon realises his mixed heritage and what this heritage can offer in the landscape of Capricornia. There are two episodes in particular that I would like to explore in order to argue that Herbert’s construction of Norman wishes to depict a unified Indigenous-settler hybrid as the ideal type suited to the country of the Northern Territory.

During his stay at Red Ochre, Norman impresses Oscar with “his usefulness, his genius indeed” (277).

This belies the attitudes towards and misapprehensions of the dominant settler culture against someone of Indigenous heritage. The town is so amazed by “the genius of Young Yeller⁹ Shillingsworth” (277) that many visitors came to see his achievements at improving the yield of Red Ochre. Chief among these, Herbert writes, “was a permanent water-supply he had set up at negligible cost on the driest part of his run” (278). Norman’s genius in this case applies most to his improvement of the economic value of the land’s natural resources and the simplicity of the solution with which he achieves this. As Herbert writes:

This contrivance of Norman’s was very simple, one about which the most remarkable thing was the very fact that no-one had thought of it before. Near the southern boundary of the run lay a chain of great flat porous rocks some two miles long, round which, covering an area of two or three square miles, grew the best of the Station’s permanent grazing, in spite of the fact that no part was further removed from permanent water. The earth owed its fertility to the rocks, which gave off moisture, or sweated. The chain was but the exposed backbone of a great expanse of rock that underlay the grass. The hidden expanse apparently sweated all the time; hence the permanent verdure; but the back did not, or rather did not appear to do so, except for a couple of hours before sunrise, when it would be found to be literally dripping. The reason for this state of things was that the backbone was hot all day and night except during a couple of hours before dawn, and that its moisture was for the most part given off in vapour. This had been known for long. It remained for Norman to make use of it. (278)

To make use of this potential, “Norman built a shed of boughs over a portion of the backbone, and on the following morning had [...] a fairly large expanse of wet rock in the broad hot glare of day” (278). After Norman thickens the roof and scores the rock “with a vein-like system of channels” (278). “He soon had the pleasure of giving a pannikinful of cool sweet water to his uncle” (278-9). Norman’s ability to make use of an otherwise wasted resource is reminiscent of his father’s [Mark Shillingsworth] ingenuity in developing the hydro-electric plant years earlier. Where his father’s

efforts proved fruitless, Norman's proved a success, improving the health and wellbeing of Red Ochre's cattle on an enormous tract of land which otherwise only had "two or three billabongs" (279) from which to obtain water. What Herbert describes as Norman's "masterpiece" (279), I would argue is the metaphoric culmination of the potential of the two predominating races of the region collaborating. The novel suggests the landscape – governed by the mystery of "the Spirit of the Land" (293)–possesses the ability to provide resources to whoever can harness it. Norman's ability to harness the potential of the landscape where others have failed illustrates the value of a convergence between Aboriginal and settler cultures, knowledge and traditions in the unrelenting country of the North. Possessing Indigenous and settler heritage, Norman, I argue, is suggested to have an innate knowledge of both "the Spirit of the Land" (293) and the ways of Civilisation, which equally contribute to his ability to exercise dominion over the landscape in order to fully realise its potential. Despite Norman's indoctrination into Civilisation, I argue that the novel indicates that Norman retains an innate, spiritual connection to the landscape, which becomes evident in the episode of the golden beetle.

After discovering that he is the illegitimate child of Mark and an Indigenous woman—not the son of a Javanese princess, as Oscar had led him to believe—Norman ventures south to the Melisande to avoid further ridicule at being an illegitimate "half-caste", intending to take a job in the new rail construction. Riding on horseback, he realises at one point that he had "never before [been] out of earshot of his kind" (293).¹⁰ In this position of loneliness, he began to sense "the Spirit of the Land to the full" (293). In the following passage, Norman experiences what Indigenous people refer to in English as "the Dreaming", alternatively known as "the dream time" or "*alcheringa*" (Stanner, "Dreaming", 57). The concept, as Stanner relates, is "often almost untranslatable" (57) and broadly refers to the "Australian Aborigines' outlook on the universe and man" (57). Stanner suggests that through his experiences, the Dreaming has "a central meaning [as] that of a sacred, heroic time long ago when man and nature came to be

as they are" (57) and even though this central meaning relates to an "indefinitely remote past [...] such a time is also, in a sense, still part of the present" (58). The Dreaming, then, in the context it is often referred to is a communion with a spiritual world interwoven with the physical world. This communion with spirits who exist in physical landmarks—as for instance, in the creation story of the geographical feature of the Three Sisters in the Blue Mountains west of Sydney¹¹--provides an individual with knowledge of the landscape's creation, as well as the laws and rules of their people, related through the mythology attached to local landmarks. The Dreaming is therefore unchallengably sacred and resonates throughout everything that exists. Stanner concludes that: "The Dreaming is many things in one. Among them, a kind of narrative to things that once happened; a kind of charter of things that still happen; and a kind of *logos* or principle of order transcending everything significant for Aboriginal man (58)". It thus becomes tremendously significant that Norman, the man raised to ignore his Indigenous heritage, is able to connect with this sacred spirituality.

When Norman begins to experience "the Spirit of the Land to the full," (Herbert 293) he witnesses "phantoms," who "came crowding, wailing afar off, whispering as they neared, treading with tiny sounds, flitting like shadows" (293). It is then that his totem animal appears, essentially, to guide him through this unfamiliar plane. "A golden beetle shot into the firelight [...] then settled in a bush, [and] began to sing" (293). The song, which Norman perceives is directed at him, has an eerie note to it, "rising rising waxing waxing seizing mind compelling limb – eeyung – eeyung – eeyong – eeyong – eeyah – eeyah – eeyah – voice of the spirit of Terra Australis" (293). Herbert abandons traditional diction in this passage in order to convey the trance-like effect of the golden beetle's song on Norman, as the young man becomes immersed in the song, "[taking] up a stick and beat[ing] upon a log" (294) to follow the tune. Wevers suggests that this incident can be read as an initiation for Norman: "A.P. Elkin in 'The Australian Aborigines' described initiation as a 'transition rite [...] fashioned on [...] death' (198) and certainly Norman's perception of the landscape is that it is a landscape

of death from which he seeks deliverance” (42). One could suggest that Norman is seeking deliverance not just from his immediate situation, but indeed from the abjection of the “half-caste”. Afterwards, Norman feels ashamed by this communion with his Indigenous heritage, having taught to believe that it is something primitive and pitiable. Regardless, the experience has irrevocably changed Norman’s perception of the landscape: the “stars that formerly had been as familiar as street-lamps [became] [...] unutterably strange, vastly remote, infinite, arranged now to form mysterious designs of frightening significance” (294) and even the previously innocent call of “the kwiluk” bird “became the lamenting of the wandering Devils of the Dead” (294). It was at this point that Norman first “realised his Aboriginal heritage” (294), imbuing his life and his perception of the Capricornian landscape with a greater sense of meaning.

I argue that these two passages demonstrate that Indigenous culture and knowledge enrich the otherwise harsh and sterile Australian landscape with a mystery and mythology desperately lacking in the Australian zeitgeist. The innate connection to land allowed Norman to realise how best to retrieve water that was otherwise being lost to evaporation, and his education in British systems of engineering enabled him to develop a suitable structure to retain this water. And Norman’s Indigenous heritage again enriched his existence by altering what was once a banal arrangement of stars “as familiar as street-lamps” (294) into “mysterious designs of frightening significance” (294). What I suggest then is that Herbert is arguing in *Capricornia* for the inherent value that the adoption of Indigenous traditions, culture, spirituality and knowledge would present for an Australian nation predominantly comprised of people of settler origins with little to no personal connection to the land. The combination of these two diverse cultures would enable both peoples to find a balance in dealing with the harshness of the Australian continent, indeed, enabling all peoples of the nation to thrive in an otherwise seemingly hostile landscape, simultaneously enriching the Australian nation and all its people with a well-developed sense of history, mythology and belonging.

5 Conclusion

Throughout the novel, Herbert depicts mixed-race Indigenous peoples as spectres, relegated to the periphery between British and Indigenous Australians. In a manner symbolic of these characters’ place in Australian society, these figures are largely alterior to the central plot, but retain marginal contributions to the novel’s development. Norman Shillingsworth, however, is the fortunate exception to this motif. One observes through *Capricornia* the centrality of Norman Shillingsworth to both the novel and the fictional settlement. Such opportunities are not afforded to the remainder of the mixed-race population of the novel, for the singular reason that no other mixed-race character is adopted, cared for and educated in the manner Oscar does for Norman under the pretense of him being a different ethnicity. Therefore, through the fortunes of Norman, Herbert makes a strong point about the unnecessary misfortune of the mixed-race population of Australia. The widely-held opinion—espoused here by the Chief Protector of Aborigines in 1919, that “what [‘half-castes’] inherit of the superior intelligence and tastes of the whites is nullified by the retarding instincts of the blacks” (Evans 153)—that the mixed-race population was inherently genetically diluted by the presence of Indigenous blood was only bolstered by the “degeneration [...] destitution and degradation” (Evans 153) observed in such individuals. The reality is that the “degeneration [...] destitution and degradation” of the mixed-race population was the direct result of social opinions of their inferiority. Provided with a rudimentary and largely inadequate education in most cases, these peoples had very little potential for upward mobility in an economic society. Hence, the perception of Indigenous inferiority is what drove their inability to compete in colonial society.

In *Capricornia*, a stark picture of colonial guilt emerges to contemporary readers concerning the historical and ongoing devastation of the Indigenous population. The novel’s publication coincided with the year of the sesquicentenary of the arrival of the First Fleet, a fact that should not be ignored given that Herbert expressed a desire to spread a greater awareness

of the suffering of Indigenous Australians throughout the country. However, Herbert also uses the plight of Indigenous Australians under colonisation as a means of demonstrating the absurd cruelties of colonisation. In the Indigenous peoples of Australia, Herbert identifies a vast resource of cultural and spiritual knowledge that is otherwise being wasted because of Indigenous peoples' exclusion from the broader Australian society. What *Capricornia* indicates, then, is that exercising dominion over the landscape is through the collaboration of British and Indigenous approaches, ideologies, knowledge and practices in order to fully harness the mythological, spiritual and commercial potential of the vast and ancient landscape.

Notes

1. *Slang*: Aborigine (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/binghi>)
2. We now know, through the work of Bruce Pascoe, that Indigenous people were far more sophisticated in their cultivation of foodstuffs. Indeed, Pascoe quotes contemporaneous sources such as that of Major Thomas Mitchell, who noted: "dry heaps of [...] grass [had] been pulled expressly for th[e] purpose of gathering the seed lay along our path for many miles" (20).
3. Roughly translated as laws, but better understood as obligations and rights that take into account the individual's relationship to the landscape.
4. "An Aboriginal bush hut, typically made of sheets of bark and branches" (<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/gunyah>).
5. [in Western Australia] "boomerang" (<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/kylie>)
6. [*offensive*] "An Aboriginal woman" (<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/lubra>)
7. "an assembly of Aborigines typified by singing and dancing, sometimes associated with traditional sacred rites" (<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/corroboree?s=t>)
8. Latin: "An act or situation that provokes or justifies a war" (<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/casus-belli?q=casus+belli>).
9. perjorative term for a mixed European-Indigenous individual.
10. For the purpose of this article, I take "his kind" to mean all humans.

11. <http://www.bluemts.com.au/info/thingstodo/threesisters/>

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