

## Vellum, Visions and Pastoral Transposition

Kylie Crane (University of Mainz)<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract:

*Bringing together the visual, the literary and the material, 'pastoral' is a complex concept. It has idyllic and labour-intensive connotations, alludes to the religious and the agricultural, and has specific generic traditions as well as often less clearly articulated quotidian uses. The following analyses of Andrew McGahan's *The White Earth* and J.M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K* trace the transposition of pastoral into the Australian and South African contexts respectively, showing the ways in which various interpretations and uses of the pastoral inform and are informed by the politics of the novels. In particular, attention is paid to the paradigm of visibility, of seeing and of being seen, of landscape and landscaping, and of the power positions entailed by these practices. Pastoral, anti-pastoral, post-pastoral; as legal term, landscape tradition, land-use practice: The metaphor of vellum picks up on all of these characteristics as a leitmotif for reading postcolonial pastoral as deference to as well as difference from pastoral traditions.*

Pastoral functions both as adjective and noun, as landscape and poetic trope. It references both visual and literary forms. Suggestive of country life, pastoral may evoke the grazing of sheep or cattle; with its religious connotations, it references spiritual guidance ('the Lord is my shepherd'). 'Common sense' understandings of ideas inform texts as much as highly theorised conceptualisations and histories, so that the poetic pastoral, the agricultural pastoral and the visual tradition of pastoral landscape renditions work together as they work against each other. The many layers of the meaning of the term add a thickness of description to that which it names; I adopt the metaphor of vellum as a mode of exploring these layers, as well as referencing the visual components of pastoral together with its material agricultural associations. The emphasis on seeing, on not-seeing, being seen, not being seen, and 'seeing as'—those moments when we as readers are called into specific positions with or against narrators and characters in narratives—reveal interrelations between the different genres informing the pastoral and, importantly, evoke postcolonial (or otherwise politicised) critique of power positions.<sup>1</sup>

Regimes of 'seeing' are often problematised in postcolonial writing under the rubric of the imperial gaze. In his attempt to bring together postcolonial and ecocritical critique, Rob Nixon establishes the term 'postcolonial pastoral' as "writing that refracts an idealized nature through memories of

---

<sup>1</sup> Kylie Crane, (crane@uni-mainz.de). Kylie Crane is a Junior Professor in Anglophone Literatures and Cultures at the University of Mainz (Germersheim).

environmental and cultural degradation in the colonies [...] [that] can be loosely viewed as a kind of environmental double consciousness" (Nixon 239). Nixon's adaptation of W.E.B. Du Bois' terminology—in turn adapted and popularised by Paul Gilroy in the subtitle to *The Black Atlantic*, that is, *Modernity and Double Consciousness*—indicates his interest in the politics of positions taken. Nixon's primary concern with the (in)compatibility of ecocritical and postcolonial approaches is not central here, but does suggest an intervention into ideologies of representation in the vein of W.J.T. Mitchell's assertion that "[l]andscape as a cultural medium [...] has a double role with respect to something like ideology: it naturalizes a cultural and social construction, [...] interpellating its beholder in some more or less determinate relation to its givenness as sight and site" (Mitchell 2). The pastoral serves as a particularly interesting site to explore this insight, following both its literary and visual permutations and the ways they have been transported and altered in postcolonial settings.

In this article, I look at two novels for the ways they engage with the pastoral tradition, Andrew McGahan's *The White Earth* and J.M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K*. The former is an Australian novel set against the backdrop of Aboriginal land rights and Anglo-Australian belonging and possession;<sup>2</sup> the latter, a South African novel, is set against an extrapolated future Apartheid. Both texts problematize neat categorisations of the pastoral, thus indicating shortcomings of the term—understood in simplistic or reductive ways—as it has been transposed into new contexts. In my examination of the ways in which *The White Earth* and *Life & Times* trouble the pastoral, I thus explore a genre that has both a textual and visual tradition as a landscape. At the core of this contribution are the different ways these two postcolonial and post-settler texts engage with and challenge the pastoral. The metaphor I propose for thinking through postcolonial pastoral is a textual one that draws strongly on the visual, namely that of the vellum. It suggests that several images can be seen at once, although some will be more dominant than others by virtue of their placement with respect to each other.

Andrew McGahan's *The White Earth*, first published in 2004, is set predominantly in 1992 in rural Queensland, taking the lead-up to the *Native Title Act* as its central political reference point. It follows two chronological perspectives in a rigorously organized manner: William Mclvor's 'coming of age' set in 1992, and his great-uncle John Mclvor's story, beginning in the first half of the twentieth century, leading up to the events of 1992. John dreams of belonging to the land, a dream he wishes to pass on to his grand-nephew. These dreams are complicated by the reassessment of the laws upon which 'pastoral leases' have been established. The novel tends to adopt the naive perspective of nine-year-old Will to explore the issues rural post-settler-Australia has with the anticipated repercussions of the *Native Title Act*—in response to what is known as 'the Mabo decision'. It is also a barely masked examination of the motives of the far right (linking in with the establishment of the "One Nation Party" in Queensland, founded after the setting of the novel but prior to its publication).

J.M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K* was first published in 1983 and is set in a 'future South Africa' extrapolating from the Apartheid system of the country at the time of writing (Cf. also Attridge 48-49). This novel also adopts two perspectives, that of the titular Michael K is dominant and is 'supplemented' by the perspective of a medical doctor.<sup>3</sup> We follow Michael K, CM (Coloured Male, cf. 70), as he grants his dying mother's wish to return to the farm of her birth, finally spreading her ashes on the soil of his grandparent's master's farm. There, in the veld, he attempts to establish a garden. He skirts encounters with soldiers, guerillas, and the white owner's grandson, is interned and then escapes from a prison camp, finally dreaming, at the end of the novel, of seeds and slow plant growth.

These two texts address landscape forms comprehended through their specific literary tradition, namely that of English language literature as also attested by the literary prizes both novels have received.<sup>4</sup> Questions of “whether the African landscape can be articulated in a European language” (Coetzee 1988, 167) as J.M. Coetzee has asked, or as Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin foreground through the chapter titles in *The Empire Writes Back*,<sup>5</sup> are questions typical of settler-invader colonies, more specifically, of Europeans or people of European descent in such colonies. In shorthand: These are post-settler concerns, concerns of ‘translation,’ in the broadest sense of translation, that is, of being transposed from one specific (geographical, historical, sociological) context that provides a source code to another context that attempts to approximate this code. Such transpositions bring interruptions to aesthetics, as well as to politics and life.

The working landscape of Will’s father’s farm in McGahan’s novel—the farm Will must leave after the tragedy of a harvester fire—is one of an almost-working landscape: the wheat “was always too thin”, the harvester “too old, always prone to breaking down” (6), the vegetable garden was “planted ambitiously” (9) but nothing grows, and the chickens became fox feed a few years ago with the chicken coop reduced to “doors swung empty and the wire fencing gaped” (9). The almost-but-not-quite character of the farm suggests a ‘poor translation’ of the pastoral. This sentiment is echoed in descriptions of orchards and farms along the roadside on K’s trip north through Coetzee’s apocalyptic South Africa. “Worm-eaten fruit” and “evidence of neglect” (39) describe the fields he passes through, and despite the abundance, K’s imagination of “a shot cracking out from the back window of the farmhouse” (39) disrupts the forbearing calm of the pastoral idea. There is an idea of pastoral, but it is troubled.

Graham Huggan, in an article on V.S. Naipaul’s pastoral, has suggested that

there is still something very English about the pastoral, despite the adapted versions of it found in North America, Australia, and many other regions of the English-speaking world. In former settler colonies, in particular, pastoral has been a lens through which to view a native landscape that defies the imported vocabulary mapped onto it, and for which the language of either realised accommodation or imagined refuge cannot readily be found. (Huggan 75)

There are several layers within this quote. Firstly, the use of visual metaphors (“lens”, “view”) implicates sight and thus alludes to privileges of the sentient seeing being. Secondly, the idea that a concept from one world that is troubled when it is “mapped” or grafted onto another landscape, like the idea of ‘translation’ I introduced above, suggests that certain ideas retain significance even whilst they are altered when they meet new circumstances. This idea also finds expression in the ‘replacing’s of the title chapters in *The Empire Writes Back*. Thirdly, and on a different note, this passage brings the ‘Englishness’ of the pastoral to the fore, an idea that I find persistent in several other accounts of the pastoral that I cite in this article. The pastoral, however, has a tradition that reaches back to Ancient Greece, as introductions to the genre attest.<sup>6</sup> The pastoral, when understood as “very English”, as it often implicitly is—rolling grassy hills, small tufts of wool, saturated greens—is already ‘translated’ or rather transposed. Rather than noting the short-falls of such accounts and references that do not attend to the Greek roots, I find it more felicitous to consider the pastoral as a densely layered type rather than a tradition of clear trajectory. Adaptations, thus understood, are not functions of their adherence to or departure from a ‘true pastoral’, but rather attest to the ongoing influence of a complex idea by engaging in the various layers of the pastoral.

The following passage from *The White Earth* demonstrates how such layering might work in the written text, at the same time as it reminds the reader of the visual repercussions of the pastoral. Here, we have the narrator telling us how England reads a painting in his uncle's office:

William turned his head and [...] saw another painting, as indistinct as the first. There were white blobs [...], this time they were a flock of sheep. Horses grazed on long grass nearby, their riders leaning easily upon their backs. The colours were different, too, brown and muted, and instead of rolling hills and castles in the background, William could discern the vague outline of the House. This wasn't England any more. And off in one corner of the painting, so faded as to be almost invisible, was a collection of shapes recognisable as people only because of their white eyes and teeth. Black men, looking on from the shadows, their expressions impossible to read. Hostile? Fearful?

Phantoms. He blinked and the vision was gone. (McGahan 46-47)

Here, McGahan uses words to evoke a painting. The sheep, horses and riders reference the pastoral tradition, yet this impression is quickly negated. The painting functions through difference, "the colours were different", although the reference of this difference remains unclear at this stage, and must be determined by the reader, and is confirmed two lines later: England. The pastoral is here landscape art - and the trope is, according to the logic of the text, apparent even to nine-year-old William. The emphasis on the visual remains throughout *The White Earth*, in particular through the continuing reference to colours (the white, or absence of colour, expressed in the title, and also black, brown and red; the green typically associated with the pastoral is largely missing).

What I wish to put forward at this stage is the idea that *The White Earth* deliberately confuses literary and visual traditions in its engagements with the pastoral in the form of a landscape painting. I question understandings of the term landscape that resist the visual component in written texts, extending Yi-Fu Tuan's point that "we can take painted landscapes to be special structurings of reality that for a time enjoyed a measure of popular acclaim" (Tuan 122). We present our world to ourselves and to others in a manner that is increasingly visual, and thus increasingly relying on visual paradigms of presentation. Photographic practices abound in the online world; print media (such as newspapers, magazines, advertisements) and television (also film) also rely on photographic practices.<sup>7</sup> A cross-over effect between visual 'structurings' and narrative 'structurings' can be observed. It thus is not paradoxical to write, as here, of the narration of a landscape, or to draw attention towards the cross-fertilisation occurring between print and visual media.

In his collection of essays entitled *White Writing*, first published in 1988, J.M. Coetzee proposes:

If literary landscape is not to be a secondary and inferior art, a mere verbal transcription of a scene already visually composed, it must do, or at least offer to do, something that pictorial landscape cannot: read out and articulate the meaning of the landscape. (Coetzee 1988, 166)

In this manner, the idea of the pastoral is also reiterated. Only a certain few phrases are necessary in order to evoke either the pictorial or the poetic tradition: 'rolling hills', 'sheep', 'shepherd', 'fields', as well as a number of semantically related terms suffice in conjunction to evoke a particular image, that is, a particular landscape or practice of seeing and perceiving. Landscape is a particular type of environment, one that foregrounds seeing. Landscape becomes mythical, archetypal, "a cultural image," to follow Stephen Daniels and Denis Cosgrove, "a pictorial way of representing, structuring

or symbolising surroundings” (Daniels and Cosgrove 1).<sup>8</sup> Landscape, like environment, postulates a particular position, a perspective; but, unlike environment, which does not restrict the perceiving sense to the visual, it presses the perspective, insisting on a viewpoint. In this respect, it is much like a narrative, or, more specifically, much like the way literary scholars talk about narratives.

The dominance of the visual in narratology’s attempts to categorise narrative types has been observed by Christian Huck in his article “Coming to Our Senses: Narratology and the Visual”.<sup>9</sup> Huck traces the influences of specific forms of technology on our concept of vision, of how we talk about seeing, and links these with Bal’s definition of focalization, which could not “be more visual” (Huck 204). The term focalization evokes photography, as students of literary studies classes are taught. “Closer attention to the perceptual situation and its technical and discursive determinations” Huck stresses, “might be able to distinguish historically and culturally specific embodiments of different narrative positions” (Huck 216). That particular power positions might be allocated particular narrative roles, that the ability to see or not, to capacity to be seen, or not, is an idea which deserves closer attention.

“Vision is *always* a question of the power to see – and perhaps of the violence implicit in our visualizing practices” (Haraway 680, emphasis in orig.); “For the observer, sight confers power” (Ashcroft 141). Much work has been done on the interplay of mapping, owning, controlling, surveying, and commanding. Mary Louise Pratt’s *Imperial Eyes*, for instance, offers a powerful image for this in the title of her book. Sight establishes power, greater sight means greater power. A comparison of the visual power of the two focalisers in the novels at hand corroborates this position: A little white boy atop a grain silo, canvassing the farms below him, and a black man, hiding in a cave, leaving only to water his plants.

*The White Earth* describes a spot on top of one of the grain silos as William’s favourite spot: “he could sit on the peaked roof and see the whole farm at a glance, laid out like a quilt”, a vista is thus provided not only of his father’s farm but also of the neighbouring properties, “dozens of farms, hundreds, stretching out to a patchwork blur under an uninterrupted sky” (10). The silo not only enables the storage of grain, and is thus an essential component of colonial agricultural projects, for storable goods could, in the colonial past, be more readily transformed through trade. It works as a ‘flag’ jutting up over the treeline, marking the soil it is constructed on for its use, but also marking a kind of land ownership, a form of ownership that historically has occluded Aboriginal custodianship. It is of note that the site is elevated. It is a site of visual privilege that acts as William’s favourite spot, and it is from this position that William is able to describe his surroundings, localising the text in its particular context: “These were the Kuran Plains. They occupied, William knew, the northern part of a greater region known as the Darling Downs” (10), a pastoral, pleasant evocation. And he knows what lies beyond: “Somewhere out there was a river known as the Condamine, and countless miles beyond that was the Outback, the desert, and the whole of Australia” (10).

William’s supposed naiveté is used throughout *The White Earth* as a foil for introducing the unknowing reader to the region and the politics surrounding the lead-up to the *Native Title Act*. This foil is, however, continually undermined by such phrases as “William knew”, as above, as well as his visual command from the spot on the silo. Later in the text, William is privy to another type of vision, seeing ghosts of explorers and the mythical Bunyip on a coming-of-age trek his great-uncle sends him on through the latter’s drought-stricken station. The ontological status of these visions within the fictional world is, however, questioned by the discovery by the close of the novel of an ear infection William has been suffering. The insights thus received—in a mode reminiscent of magic realism—are questioned by the story itself. A commitment to a particular pattern of seeing by reading is thus

undermined by the text, troubling the reader's 'vision' of the story, but maintaining William's control.

The ambiguous legacy of pastoralism, as Tom Lynch has pointed out, draws on "undeniable drama and heroism mixed with [...] imperial heritage and ecological destructiveness [evincing] ambiguity and discontent about the pastoralising process" (Lynch 72). Such notions lie at the centre of *The White Earth* and its exploration of Aboriginal and post-settler land rights: Questions of who may possess the land and who belongs to the land are foregrounded throughout the novel. It also poses questions of the pastoral that are refracted in *Life & Times*.

In *White Writing*, published five years after *Life & Times*, Coetzee writes of the "silence about the place of the black man in the pastoral idyll, and the silence it creates when it puts into the mouth of the black countryman a white man's words" (Coetzee 1988, 81). This offers an interpretative key for the reading of K as truncated or silent, a result of the politics of the act of writing as a white man about a black man. The landscapes that are evoked in Coetzee's novel are truncated, epitomised in the protagonist's name—simply K (cf. also Attridge 51). The limits the narration places between reader and character are thus foregrounded at the outset. This distance is reinforced by the narrative situation. On a surface level, it is notable that the thoughts of the character at the centre of the text, the character named in the title, are related in the third-person whereas the (white, educated) doctor of the second section is allocated the first-person passages. An imbalance in identity politics, an imbalance in *voice*, is thus easily discernible, but there is more to it than this. As Derek Attridge observes, the stylistic choices Coetzee makes mean that "although we learn in moving detail of his thought-processes and emotions, we never feel that we have assimilated them to our own" (Attridge 50). We remain excluded from the narration; K remains excluded from the narrative world.

"At last" we read in a rare moment of free indirect discourse "I am living off the land" (46) but the limits of Michael K's pastoral vision are at once the war—"From horizon to horizon the landscape was empty" (46)—and the refusal to view the landscape—"He climbed a hill and lay on his back listening to the silence" (46). It is here that K ponders the politics of farming and inheritance:

He could understand that people should have retreated here and fenced themselves in [...] that they should have wanted to bequeath the privilege of so much silence to their children and grandchildren in perpetuity (though by what right he was not sure); he wondered whether there were not forgotten corners and angles and corridors between the fences, land that belonged to no one yet. Perhaps if one flew high enough, he thought, one would be able to see. (47)

There are several points to explore. Here, K recognises that the pastoral dream of inheritance excludes himself, or as Rita Barnard suggests, that the pastoral is the result of "invisible labor of black hands" (Barnard 204). The pastoral utopia entails a layer of dystopia in postcolonial settings, a point I will address in more detail below. Further, the mechanism of exclusion is reinforced by the references towards fences, and throughout the novel, K is pushed off the road, ordered off the road, pushed off the land, and ordered into internment. The final image, a reference to flight, an impossibility, confirms K's lack of power, his inability to engage in visual control of the landscape.

Alternatively gardener, lavatory attendant, and gardener, K's *curriculum vitae* initially suggests an affinity with the landscapes of South Africa. K can be read as 'invisible labor force', following Barnard. But, taking Attridge's insistence that K not be 'reduced' to allegory, K is more than an erased or forgotten figure, more than just a member of his race, he is also K, regardless of how difficult it might be to empathise with such a truncated position. In fact, the barriers between the character and the

reader—the lack of “codes given in advance” (Attridge 53) to help the reader interpret the character—might instead be seen as portraying K ‘more like’ other people, who generally avoid the kind of insight we are accustomed to in fiction. In this respect, *Life & Times* reminds us of the limits on our own vision.

The pastoral of *The White Earth* is evoked in a further scene I wish to examine in detail, through the description of Aboriginal land practices. It is a more or less didactic passage that seems intended to show young Will McIvor that Anglo-Australians are not the only ones to ‘work the land. “Every summer,” Ruth, his second cousin, explains

apparently, they [the Aborigines] burned the plains clean through. That way they had fresh green grass every year, and so more animals would come down from the hills for them to hunt. [...] The problem was, they did too good a job. A hundred and fifty years ago, the squatters came along and saw all that beautiful grass. And they thought, wow, won't this be perfect for cattle and sheep. And aren't we lucky that all this pasture is just sitting here, with no one using it. So they marched on in. (277)<sup>10</sup>

Her emphasis is on the use of the land before the arrival of the settlers in order to emphasise their rights to the land. In doing so, she relies on a Western understanding that only land that has been altered is owned land. This only contradicts the *terra nullius* argument in the terms of European or white settler categories of land use. This way of thinking about land works to obscure other ways of thinking about land. In the broader context of the postcolonial pastoral, passages such as this one question the erasures that pastoral paradigms reinforce and re-enact.

Michael Bennett proposes the anti-pastoral to redress the idea of different perspectives of the pastoral in his analysis of *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, stating “African Americans in the antebellum United States were much more likely to be referred to in the lexicon of slavery as sheep rather than shepherds” (Bennett 196). The anti-pastoral, as Terry Gifford outlines in his introductory text *Pastoral*, works to act as a corrective to a pastoral vision. But the pastoral is not (only) being corrected, it continues as a type despite its shortcomings: “Pastoral in South Africa” Coetzee argues in *White Writing*,

has a double tribute to pay. To satisfy the critics of rural retreat, it must portray labour; to satisfy the critics of colonialism, it must portray white labour. [...] For how can the farm become the pastoral retreat of the black man when it *was* his pastoral home only a generation or two ago? (Coetzee 1988, 5)

The anti-pastoral requires double vision, a sense of diplopia where one image is duplicated, as well a sense of the double consciousness Rob Nixon has proposed.

A certain slippage in meaning is taking place when K’s version of the pastoral project is equated with the garden, one that cannot be entirely contained by the anti-pastoral. My concern here is not with the slip in meaning away from some originary, true meaning of pastoral, but rather in the fact of this influence of the pastoral on images of gardens (and, indeed, vice versa). The garden, as a manifestation of spatial and cultural practices, has a number of repercussions for consideration in postcolonial contexts: Primarily, the domination of European agricultural spatial practices over those of non-European cultures. Such domination is not only manifested in the removal of land from other cultures’ systems, demarcated generally through fences which are given prominence in the longer passage from Coetzee’s novel quoted above. It also entails what Alfred W. Crosby has called ‘ecological imperialism’ and Richard Grove ‘green imperialism’: The introduction, cultivation and

domination of certain species at the cost of others.<sup>11</sup> In this sense, the garden can be seen as a response to the pastoral, but not one that necessarily incorporates the responses envisaged by the anti-pastoral.

A simple man of simple needs, K does not leave for the farms of the Prince Albert district by his own desire, instead he apparently gives himself over to the dreams of his mother. His mother Anna's memories of the countryside, her vision of "escaping from the careless violence, the packed buses, the food queues" is to facilitate a "returning to a countryside where, if she was going to die, she would at least die under blue skies" (Coetzee 2004, 8). This topos of escape, of retreat, is central to pastoral. Gifford, however, suggests that "[w]hatever the locations and modes of pastoral retreat may be, there must in some sense be a return from that location to a context in which the results of the journey are to be understood" (Gifford 81). Anna's vision of her death in the pastoral landscape cannot be a pastoral retreat, nor is her narrative perspective privileged by the text. And whereas K, in the end, does in fact return to the city, he is weary, not replenished, and without much of a context to comprehend his journey.

In my reading, the path closest to the pastoral offered by Coetzee's novel is through the return of the Visagie grandson to the homestead on the farm, the man who in turn interpellates K into his role as servant. The narratological set-up of *Life & Times* does not privilege the grandson, but does offer, in Huggan and Tiffin's words "a useful opportunity to open up the tension between ownership and belonging in a variety of colonial and postcolonial contexts: contexts marked, for the most part, by dispossession and loss" (Huggan and Tiffin 85). *The White Earth* is also insistent on reminding us of the political implications of pastoral, placing the account of the return to the farm alongside other accounts, emphasising how "infinitely malleable" (Garrard 33) the trope is, by offering different accounts of the station's history. Both texts suggest a break with the pastoral at the same time as continuing an engagement with it.

Terry Gifford has proposed the 'post-pastoral' "to refer to literature that is aware of the anti-pastoral" and that can "enable 'a mature environmental aesthetics' to sift the 'sentimental pastoral' from the 'complex pastoral'" (Gifford 149). Gifford's post-pastoral suggests awe towards the natural world, accepting the circular quality of nature, links between human's and their environments and thus also "an awareness of both nature as culture and of culture as nature" (162), that such acknowledgments will lead to political engagements, or in Gifford's words "that with consciousness comes conscience" (163), and, finally, a moment that accounts for politically engaged perspectives that draw people-based critiques together with environmental critique. K dreams, at the end of the novel, as a gardener: He dreams of returning to rectify his mistake of not having enough seeds, of not bidding his calling as a gardener. The land ethic, to borrow a little from Aldo Leopold, is not one of domination, but one of patient bidding. "There is nothing to be ashamed of in being simple" (Coetzee 2004, 182) we read, and are left with the image of K spooning out water from the depths of the earth, a vision of subsistence life. This vision is both a version of Gifford's post-pastoral, but also more than just aware of the anti-pastoral, and, in its insistence on the garden, also pastoral of itself. The ethical moments of *The White Earth*, in particular the bunyip as a vision of indigenous and settler belonging, are present but also undermined by the close of the novel that questions the extent to which this vision has import in the fictional world. The anti-pastoral, most notably the juxtaposition of the white bones of the indigenous tribes of the Bunyan mountains with the bones of explorers, settlers and sheep in the text, is also present in McGahan's novel; and the traditional pastoral vision is echoed throughout the landscapes the text carefully sketches. No singular conception of the pastoral seems to account for the differing, even contradictory, engagements with the pastoral in either novel.

Postcolonial pastoral, as envisioned here, recognizes the paradoxes of pastoral: the removal of people for animal agriculture (cf. also Rose), the masking of indigenous labour, the doubled vision of retreat that moves away at the same time it moves towards, the insistence on the colour green.<sup>12</sup> The pastoral of both of the novels explored in this article maintains an, albeit troubled, relationship to the aesthetics of the landscape form; racial depictions of labour are not simply reversed, a gesture which would be simply reductive. The ethics of Gifford's post-pastoral are present, but do not account for all of the pastoral moments. To read postcolonial pastoral is to learn to question the deference to and the difference from pastoral. It is multi-layered.

The metaphor of the palimpsest has, to date, been influential in explicating such layers. It certainly offers itself as a metaphor akin to literary analyses, in that it foregrounds material practices of writing, practices that writers like critics engage in. The 'thickness' of text alludes to Geertz and cultural anthropology, whilst the 'erasures' suggest Derridian philosophy. Here, I put forward a different, albeit related, metaphor for the interpretation of literary texts: It is similar in its appeal to the bibliophile through a metaphor of material book culture and in its reference to visual cultures of reading.<sup>13</sup> It is that of the vellum paper.

The ideas of vision and landscape, about power to see and command, and about ordering the landscape, as well as the various ideas of pastoral explored above, can be lucidly described with the metaphor of vellum paper, that semi-translucent paper that allows several pages to be viewed at once. Although now manufactured with plasticized cotton, the original vellum was created from mammal skins, as its etymological roots in Old French (calfskin) suggest. The 'accident' of this metaphor is that part of its usefulness emerges from its animal roots: Calf, sheep and goat being the primary sources of the skin; cows, sheep and goats being the primary animals in the pastoral landscape. Postcolonial pastoral as vellum paper suggests the various levels, various contradictory moments, can be simultaneously present, although certain aspects may be foregrounded, or placed above others. An overlap of similar aspects from the different ideas of the pastoral affects a heightened visibility, whereas certain contradictions between the different levels might work hard to cancel each other out. The reader, however, can flick through the different levels, turning the pages, choosing to neglect certain levels; the author provides the pages, the narrator orders them such that some are placed above others.

The metaphor of the vellum thus brings the multi-layeredness of the pastoral to the fore. The task, now, of the critic of postcolonial pastoral texts is to inscribe titles on these different, almost see-through, pages; to draw on the critical work done to date, that is, to sketch the different ideas on further pages; and to suggest how the pages might be shuffled to best map out the various meanings of the pastoral on the terrain of the text.

## Endnotes

---

1 Following Derek Gregory, such understandings can be seen to "connect or collide in complexes of action and reaction in place and over space to transform the tremulous geographies of modernity" (Gregory 12). The contrast between space and place that Gregory appears to draw on here is one that has received criticism, for more on this, cf. Massey *For Space*. This contrast has, however, been influential in postcolonial studies, particularly those concerned with settler colonies (cf. i.e. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin).

2 For more on belonging in *The White Earth*, cf. Horakova. Emily Potter offers a more ecocritically informed analysis of the novel that places great emphasis on responsibility.

3 I examine the terminology and effect of narratological perspective in more detail below.

4 *The White Earth* won the Miles Franklin Literary Award in 2005, amongst other prizes. *Life & Times of Michael K* won the (Man) Booker Prize in 1983, testifying to its reception abroad.

5 Reference here is to “Re-placing Language” and “Re-placing the Text” in particular (chapters 2 and 3 respectively).

6 cf. i.e. Gifford’s *Pastoral*.

7 The widespread sharing of such photographs through online sites such as flickr.com reiterate and consolidate practices of seeing. Photographs - ways of seeing - that are deemed ‘good’, i.e. through citation on blogs, social networks, or the like, or through commentary on such sites, gain high circulation and consolidate specific practices of seeing. Images, and, importantly, mechanisms of structuring images circulate in a manner not much different from the idea of the simulacrum, that is, the idea of the loss of original. Here, instead of lamenting the loss of some kind of authentic, romantic, melancholic gesture, the key idea I wish to stress is that of reiteration without a formally regimented control.

8 Similar sentiments: Simon Schama assertion in *Landscape and Memory*, that “the landscapes that we suppose to be most free of our culture may turn out, on closer inspection, to be its product” (Schama 9). Or, alternatively, following John Berger: “We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves” (Berger 9).

9 Indeed, metaphors of sight permeate the English language with respect to comprehension. “Do you see what I mean?” “The turn of the century saw increased mobility” “They watched as their rights were taken away” “Can you take another look at my argument?” The expression ‘to see what someone means’ is almost entirely interchangeable with ‘to understand what someone means’. The verb ‘perceive’, a variant of Old French and Latin, derives from ‘seize, understand’ and to ‘take’, meaning both to be conscious of something but also to interpret or look at something in a particular way. Clearly—and did you see what I did there?— sight is a dominant metaphor in understanding.

10 Rebecca Solnit offers a different version of the McGahan passage in her account of the establishment of Yosemite National Park: “when Bunnell, Olmsted, and their peers rode into the valley and wondered at it for its resemblance to an English landscape garden, it resembled such a garden because it was one, an explanation that never occurred to them and their successors. Had it truly been uninhabited wilderness, they might have instead entered a forest so dense that the waterfalls and rock faces they glimpsed from above would not have been so easily visible from the valley itself.” (Solnit 307) Note, in particular, the emphasis placed on sight for the view towards the sublime of wilderness vision that, in turn, emerges out of a sense of the pastoral.

11 The layers of meaning of the garden in (post)colonial contexts are perhaps most succinctly explored in the short story “Dead Men’s Path” by Chinua Achebe. The flower bed installed on the grounds of the school, and the large fence that cuts it off from its surroundings and cuts the inhabitants off from their traditional route to their cemetery, emerges as a source of conflict.

12 The continuing use of ‘green’ as an adjective in place of ‘environmental’, ‘ecocritical’ or ‘ecological’ might best be interpreted as a continuing reference to the pastoral, and as a reference that does not necessarily translate to all contexts where nature might not actually be predominantly green.

13 And particularly potent as the orality of written culture returns through various technological developments of electronic readers, but also through internet and mobile telephoning practices that blur the barrier between written and oral cultures, and thus between the visual and the aural reception of these cultures.

## Works Cited

- Ashcroft, Bill. *Post-colonial Transformation*. London and New York: Routledge, 2001.
- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Attridge, Derek. *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.
- Barnard, Rita. "J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* and the South African Pastoral". *Contemporary Literature*. Vol 44 No 2 (Summer, 2003) 199-224.
- Bennett, Michael. "Anti-Pastoralism, Frederick Douglass, and the Nature of Slavery". In: Armbruster, Karla and Kathleen R. Wallace (ed). *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*. Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2001. 195-120.
- Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. Harmondsworth: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1983.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Coetzee, J.M. *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988.
- . *Life & Times of Michael K*. London: Vintage Books, 2004.
- Crosby, Alfred W. *Ecological Imperialism. The Biological Expansion of Europe 900- 1900*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993.
- Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism*. London: Routledge, 2004.
- Gifford, Terry. *Pastoral*. London: Routledge, 1999.
- Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press, 1995.
- Gregory, Derek. *Geographical Imaginations*. Cambridge, MA and London: Blackwell, 1994.
- Grove, Richard. *Green Imperialism: Colonial expansion, tropical island Edens and the origins of environmentalism, 1600-1860*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Haraway, Donna. "The Persistence of Vision". Nicholas Mirzoeff (ed). *The Visual Culture Reader*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. London & New York: Routledge, 2008. 677-684.
- Horakova, Martina. "The Unbearable (Im)possibility of Belonging: Andrew McGahan's *The White Earth*". In: O'Reilly, Nathanael (ed). *Postcolonial Issues in Australian Literature*. Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2010. 109-128.
- Huck, Christian. "Coming to Our Senses: Narratology and the Visual". In: Hühn, Peter (ed). *Point of View, Perspective, and Focalization: Modeling Mediation in Narrative*. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009. 201-218.
- Huggan, Graham and Helen Tiffin. *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*. London: Routledge, 2010.
- Huggan, Graham. "Hating Nature Properly: Naipaul and the Pastoral". In: Chris Campbell and Erin Somerville (ed). "What is the Earthly Paradise?" *Ecocritical Responses to the Caribbean*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007. 74-84.
- Lynch, Tom. "Literature in the Arid Zone". In: CA. Cranston and Robert Zeller (eds). *The Littoral Zone: Australian Contexts and their Writers*. Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2007. 71-92.
- Massey, Doreen. *For Space*. London: Sage, 2006.
- McGahan, Andrew. *The White Earth*. Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2005.
- Mitchell, W.J.T. "Introduction" in: Mitchell, W.J.T. (ed). *Landscape and Power*. 2nd Ed. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2002. 1-4.
- Nixon, Robert. "Environmentalism and Postcolonialism." Ania Loomba et. al. (ed). *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005. 233-251.

- Potter, Emily. "Andrew McGahan's *The White Earth* and the Ecological Poetics of Memory". *Antipodes*. 20 (2). 177-182.
- Pratt, Mary Louise. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. London and New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Rose, Deborah Bird. *Reports from a Wild Country: Ethics for Decolonisation*. Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2004.
- Schama, Simon. *Landscape and Memory*. London: Vintage, 1996.
- Solnit, Rebeca. *Savage Dreams: A Journey into the Landscape Wars of the American West*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999.