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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Xavier Herbert. Requiem for Genius

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Abstract

In today's global celebrity culture it's hard to imagine a word more over-used and abused than 'genius'. It is a slippery word with a long and contradictory conceptual history. Yet, in the Land of the Tall Poppy self-confessions of genius invariably have paved a broad road to public ridicule and denigration. Xavier Herbert's notion of genius was not static. It changed throughout his life and it evolved through his writing. He agreed with Carlyle that the first condition of genius must always be a 'transcendent capacity of taking trouble' and on this foundation he built his own concept of genius, as the unending 'capacity for loving'. This article explores what genius meant to Xavier Herbert and how it translated into his fiction, before considering how our sense of genius today influences the way we respond to his most challenging fictions of love and hate, *Capricornia* and *Poor Fellow My Country*.

Keywords

genius; love; indigeneity; reconciliation

Here I want to consider the role of genius in the life and work of Xavier Herbert. His 'self-professed genius' has understandably been cast as a mark against him, a sign of overreaching egotism.¹ His own editor, Beatrice Davis, cut him down with the retort that he was a 'mug genius'.² It is a remark that was picked up in the promotion of Frances De Groen's biography of Herbert by her publisher, encapsulating the controversies and contradictions of Herbert's life in the labels assigned to him at different times: 'master writer', 'ratbag', 'mug genius'.³ But what did Herbert himself mean by genius? What did it mean to Australian readers when he was writing? And what does it mean now? Has cultural constructivism moved us so far beyond the idea of genius that the individual achievements of the past can be relegated to the dustbin of history? Genius is a word Herbert used in every one of his novels, in different contexts and with different shades of meaning—four times in *Capricornia*, eight in *Seven Emus* (which of course is a much shorter book), seven in *Soldiers' Women*, and twenty-six in *Poor Fellow My Country*. But as his own interest in genius evolved, public interest in the concept declined.

A search of content made available through Trove by the National Library's Australian Newspaper Digitisation Program (ANDP) confirms a dramatic decline in interest in the concept of genius across the twentieth century. A restricted search for references to 'literary genius' reveals an even sharper decline, from what is a low baseline to start with. As a point of comparison, 'musical genius' starts from a baseline twice as high, and through the 1920s the graph begins to climb, but then it too falls away to nothing. The baseline for public interest in 'evil genius' at the beginning of the century is three times higher than for 'literary genius', and five times higher than for 'good genius', although this is hardly surprising: after all, Milton allowed Satan a great many more lines than God in *Paradise Lost*. But the overall trend of declining public interest in genius in Australia is clear. This is particularly interesting in relation to loss of interest in Herbert's novels, because ideas of genius are crucial to them; and I do not think the fascination with genius in his work can be sheeted home to his own egotism, undeniable though it was. The dominant idea of genius today is as a stereotype of celebrity worship. As Darrin McMahon writes in his history of genius, the lustre of the word has faded 'as a result of inflated claims and general overuse', a process of democratisation that visits genius upon rock stars, football coaches and media personalities alike and that opens the possibility of achieving genius to everyone.⁴ Herbert's writing, on the other hand, speaks of a complex and often conflicted creative psychology of genius that draws from Romantic beliefs about nature, self and suffering, from Victorian pathologies of insanity, and from the now discredited ideologies of cultural nationalism, Orientalism and Jindyworobakism.

The concepts more often thematised in the field of cultural studies are 'expertise' and 'celebrity.' Yet 'genius' is a concept that continues to be deployed across a whole range of cultural fields—for example, in judges' comments on awards to literary authors. It is also prevalent in a number of cultural discourses which, although often discredited among liberal (and especially academic) critics, provide useful indices of other phenomena within contemporary cultural life. The concept in fact remains resilient in discourses of literary criticism. A keyword search of 'genius' in forms of writing specifically identified as 'criticism' in the AustLit Database currently provides sixty entries, most of which accept the concept uncritically. But the past and present differ with respect to the term 'genius' and its legibility in the cultural studies field requires careful differentiation between past and present usage. Cecil Mann's retrospective estimate of Henry Lawson's genius in 1959, for example, rested upon the claim that Lawson had created 'universal' Australians, whereas, since the rise of postcolonial literary theory in the late 1980s, the whole notion of universality in literature has become suspect.⁵ Claims for the genius of individual authors continue to be made on different grounds

and even across popular domains that once would have been excluded from contention. They feature in common a persistent insistence on the recognition of individual authorship. This is despite, as Kevin Brophy points out, ‘the pathologising narratives of genius provided by Freud ... the efforts of Barthes and Foucault in the late 1960s ... to diffuse responsibility for art out into an unfinished historical and societal project, and more lately scepticism over essentialist thinking offered by post-modernism and deconstructive approaches’.⁶ Australian researchers have gone so far as to provide material evidence (based on interviews with contemporary authors) that, when it comes to building creative thought and capacity, what counts are social and community networks. Their conclusion is that individual genius is a myth.⁷ Yet the contrary claim (that ‘Australia has not so far produced one writer of genius’) is only controversial because it maintains the achievement of individual genius as a legitimate possibility.⁸ Witness the recent media hullabaloo after the *Weekend Australian* submitted chapter three of Patrick White’s *The Eye of the Storm* (under a pseudonym and with a slightly altered title) to twelve Australian publishers and agents: ‘Not one reader recognised its literary genius, and 10 wrote polite and vaguely encouraging rejection letters.’⁹ Genius today is a much more complex and contradictory idea than cultural theorists generally allow.

For example no Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander author or critic apparently highlights the concept of genius. An unfiltered search of the AustLit database using the keyword ‘genius’ nets over six hundred entries—twenty-three referring to ‘indigenous’ genius (thirty to ‘aboriginal’ genius)—but none of the texts identified are by an Indigenous author. Indigenous authors of course have their own ways of representing literary agency and capacity. But genius is not in itself a colonialist term. Indeed Marcia Langton, who holds the Foundation Chair in Australian Indigenous Studies at the University of Melbourne and has been the forefront of developing an anti-colonial cultural critique, has identified fellow Indigenous leader, Ian Anderson, as an example of ‘rolled gold genius’. The Social Justice Commissioner, Mick Gooda, agreed.¹⁰ And Alexis Wright has described the complexity of Aboriginal languages as deriving ‘from the genius of our people’.¹¹ In view of what I will argue here about Herbert’s racialising of genius, Indigenous engagement with the concept is clearly as variegated as that of white authors, critics and cultural theorists.

Gē'nius. Tutelary spirit of person, place, or institution (good, evil g., two opposed spirits or angels working for a person's salvation or damnation, also person who powerfully influences one for good or ill); ... demon(s), supernatural being(s); nation's, age's, &c., prevalent feeling, opinions, or taste; ... associations or inspirations of a place; natural ability, special mental endowments; ... exalted intellectual power, instinctive & extraordinary imaginative, creative, or inventive capacity ... person having this ...

This is the definition of genius that appears in Xavier Herbert’s personal copy of the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, the 1929 edition, as revised by H.M. Fowler.¹² Up until his enlistment during World War II he carried it with him wherever he went, from the *Kablin Aboriginal Compound* in Darwin to his remote bush mining camps in the Finnis River Country and beyond. The book still has the thick canvas-bound cover, hand-sewn by Fang Cheong Lung, Darwin’s most prominent Chinese tailor, in 1938—the year of *Capricornia*’s publication. But Herbert must have had the dictionary for several years by then, as its front pages contain a draft list of characters for the novel in his own handwriting. We can safely assume, then, that he had it by him while he was working on the novel, maybe not from the beginning—in London, when he gave up on the title ‘Black Velvet’—but at least from the time of his decision

to name the characters allegorically.¹³ He appears to read it thoroughly, marking words of potential interest and, perhaps more surprisingly, also adding some Aboriginal words to it. The word 'genius' is unmarked. But there is another book Herbert carried with him, covered in canvas by Cheong Lung in the same year, *Fowler's Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (1926), where the following advice is marked:

genie, meaning 'a spirit of Arabian folklore', is pronounced jee-ni and has the plural form genii, pronounced jee-ni-iy. See also GENIUS.

genius, meaning 'a person of great intellectual power', has the plural form geniuses, not genii, which is the plural form of GENIE.

Although a genie and a genius are clearly not the same thing in English they are nonetheless closely related. In Ancient Rome a genius was a guardian spirit. It was only after the first French translation of the great composite text of Arabian folklore, *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* (generally known in English as *The Arabian Nights*), in the early eighteenth century that the word 'genie' entered the English language.¹⁴ Antoine Galland translated the Arabic word 'jinn' into French as 'genie', and English followed suit. So the two lines of descent collided, the one from Arabic (where a jinn was a lesser spirit, beneath angels and demons), and the other from Latin (the French 'genie' deriving as it does from the Latin, 'genius').¹⁵ The word 'genius' (unlike 'genie') was not new to English—Shakespeare provides numerous examples of its usage—but throughout the eighteenth century it became an increasingly serious topic of literary and philosophical discourse, to such a degree that it is now often regarded as really an eighteenth-century idea.¹⁶ Before that its point of reference was external, from Socrates' idea of the daemon to the Christian idea of a guardian angel. But in the eighteenth century theology lost its battle with psychology and genius came to be seen, as Edward Young put it, as 'the god within'.¹⁷ It was individualised and essentialised, and its core feature was originality. You could have talent and by careful study and rigorous application of established rules you might produce something even quite remarkable, but genius refused rules. It was spontaneous and intuitive and it produced something of a higher order.

In his highly influential *Conjectures on Original Composition*, published in 1759, Young distinguished between two different literary methods: the imitation of works by other authors and the imitation of nature. The first is a kind of 'manufacture wrought up by those mechanics, art, and labour, out of pre-existent materials not their own'.¹⁸ The second is 'of a vegetable nature; it rises spontaneously from the vital root of genius; it grows, it is not made'.¹⁹ In other words, genius gives us an original creation, whereas talent can only give us some kind of duplicate of what we have already. The imitator is a transplanter, or to put this in a postcolonial context, an importer of foreign goods and ideas that will not flourish in foreign soil. The writer of genius creates something new seemingly out of nothing—something entirely original.

The triumph of Romanticism in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries saw genius exalted for its specifically generative powers and (as Charles Taylor puts it) as a paradigm for self-definition.²⁰ But in the Victorian period—with the rise of science and of the middle classes—genius was democratized; a person might be born with talent yet squander his or her potential.²¹ Fulfilment was a matter of perspiration rather than inspiration.²² Genius, according to Carlyle, required a transcendent capacity for hard labour.²³ Herbert often cited Carlyle's formulation of genius (from Frederick the Great: the 'transcendent capacity of taking trouble'), but over time he re-invented in terms of 'capacity for loving'.²⁴

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Born in 1901, on the eve of Australian Federation, Xavier Herbert was an autodidactic repository for a vast amount of seemingly unfiltered cultural flotsam and jetsam that washed up from the Victorian age into the twentieth century. He was particularly fond of Carlyle's definition of genius and he worked hard at becoming an artist, but he also believed in the artistic necessity of suffering and solitude. His belief in his own genius was complex and by no means consistent or confident, for it was conflated with inherited family superstitions of a more pagan nature concerning the influence of good and evil spirits. We see this tension between internal and external points of spiritual references clearly in *Poor Fellow My Country*, where the gifted mixed-descent 'golden boy', Prindy, is apprenticed to the Aboriginal magic man, Bobwirridirridi. Rather than moving through the gateway of Aboriginal initiation and achieving the full potential of his 'genius', he comes to a tragic end. His white grandfather and his Indian child-bride disrupt the ceremony, and Bobwirridirridi punishes all three with death, loosing a 'blood-dimmed tide' upon the novel's world. It is a world of blocked formations, irreconcilable binary relationships black and white, and it is hard not to think of Yeats's vision of "The Second Coming" in the aftermath of World War I.

The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
 When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
 Troubles my sight: a waste of desert sand;
 A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
 A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
 Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
 Wind shadows of the indignant desert birds.²⁵

For Herbert, like Yeats, genius was the 'the central part of man' but it could be either enabled or disempowered by the 'mood of the world';²⁶ the mood of Australia, as Herbert perceived it, was hostile to the hermeneutic of imagination by which the world might be healed and reconciled. In the boyhood of his autobiographical fiction, *Disturbing Element*, an Indian tea hawker and amateur phrenologist reads the bumps on his head and declares him a genius. But his family laughs. 'Why, that's the fool of the family!' his mother exclaims. To defuse their disagreement, he jokes: 'If I'm a genius, you can put me in a lamp and when you want something special, you only got to rub it, like Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp.'²⁷

The Argentinean author Jorge Luis Borges wrote of *The Arabian Nights*, 'it is not necessary to have read it, for it is part of our memory'.²⁸ But Herbert did read it. According to *Disturbing Element*, it is one of a small handful of books he recalls from his childhood,²⁹ and at one point, remembering his entry into 'the scientific phase of his existence' when his parents allegedly took over an abandoned hospital (based on the casualty ward at Midland Junction), he explicitly likens the dispensary to an Aladdin's Cave, 'with a djin in practically every bottle'.³⁰ Of course, 'Djin' here is another word for 'genie'. The influence of *The Arabian Nights*—especially the tales of Aladdin and Ali Baba—is also palpable in Herbert's fiction. The character of Fay Fargo in *Soldiers' Women*, for example, is cast in Aladdin persona, with her collection of pseudo-medical gadgets and bottles of chemicals for procuring illegal abortions. Herbert was a pharmacist and he knew the genie in the bottle ('corrosive sublimate') could be summoned either to cure or kill.³¹ In fact, the psychological drive behind his plotting of Fay Fargo's death was to rid himself of his negative potential.³² *Poor Fellow My Country* offers another variant of Aladdin's Cave, a dispensary containing not only bottles of medicine but also a collection of zoological specimens, and even more fascinating for the 'budding' genius, Prindy, a microscope.³³ Through it the pharmacist invites him to observe a drop of his own blood, an

incident that goes to the heart of his struggle for a sense of grounded identity and the novel's core theme of blood quantum. As Jeanine Leane writes: 'It is the Yeller-fellers who occupy Herbert's consciousness because, no matter how small or how large their quotient of Aboriginal blood may be, the blood is obvious and has an impact on their ability to be truly black, but at the same time prevents them from being white or acceptable to whites either.'³⁴ The microscope offers no 'open sesame' to understanding 'the genius of race'.³⁵ The novel provides an analogue of this with the quest after the mythic Golden Finch, pursued by the Hindu bird-catcher, Rabindratha Barbu (also known as Ali Baba). At one point he catches Prindy in his net, 'all shiny gold of skin' and 'luminous of eye' and mistakes him for an Indian god.³⁶

Herbert's fiction invested heavily in both genii and geniuses. In the short story 'Machinations of a Jinx',³⁷ which he recycled as a chapter in *Capricornia*, he placed himself as the hospital dispenser. The etymology of the word 'jinx' is obscure. Some lexicographers link it to the Arabic 'jinn', but its most likely source is the Ancient Greek *iunx*, after the daughter of Pan, who specialised in love magic. In *Poor Fellow My Country* the willy wagtail incarnates the Aboriginal spirit of 'love magic' (and with the sub-incision ceremony). But in Greek mythology the bird into which Hera transformed, *iunx*, as a punishment for using her love magic on Zeus, is the wryneck, which subsequently became associated with divination and witchcraft. The author of the jinx in 'Sequel to a Song' (a later rewrite of 'Machinations of a Jinx') is an Aboriginal medicine man, who sings misfortune upon a family for their ill treatment of him. On the promise of payment he eventually lifts the curse, luring a herd of wild pigs into their traps, and after that a stampede of wild buffalo, which destroys their home, but reveals in its ruin a fortune in hidden gold.³⁸ There can be no doubt as to the Aboriginal genius of the narrative. In the original story, 'Machinations of a Jinx', from which the medicine man is absent, the family bait their own traps to attract the pigs, but instead attract the buffalo, the house is destroyed and there is no gold. Settler culture, lacking any 'native genius', and not understanding the local environment, causes ruin.

The jinx in *Capricornia* functions, as it does in 'Sequel to a Song', in an ironic mode. I have written of this elsewhere so here I will be brief.³⁹ An Irishman, Tim O'Cannon, adopts an abandoned 'white quadroon' child. (In the racial terminology of the time, this means that she is light-coloured but, according to her blood inheritance, one quarter black—and hence, according to the welfare policies of the time, more likely to be placed in an institution. (In other words, she is at risk of becoming a member of the Stolen Generations.) O'Cannon has no obligation to take her into his family, since she is not related to him by blood. Nonetheless, the novel tests his humanity by insisting upon a seven-year period of penance, through which his life is progressively 'darkened' by misfortune.⁴⁰ He never once considers giving up the child. At the end of the testing period, he is mown down by a train. But this final tragic action operates metaphorically as a means to his spiritual rebirth. The militaristic dingo, with 'his broken black teeth like a snarling dog', and his face demonically 'furrowed' and symbolically 'white as paper', has been redeemed.⁴¹ The agent of this redemption is the Jinx, which reconciles the dingo with the kangaroo—'Oh, death of a kangaroo for a Sergeant Major!'⁴²—and ushers O'Cannon into a state of belonging and oneness with Nature. Where his blood has been spilled, grass grows 'luxuriantly as nowhere else'.⁴³

The application of genius in *Capricornia*, however, is most explicit in the characterisation of Norman Shillingsworth, who (again, in the terminology of the time) is classified as a 'half-caste', although until he reaches puberty he is under the belief that his mother is high-caste Javan princess rather than an Indigenous Australian woman. His adoptive uncle, Oscar, is on the verge of sending him south to avoid embarrassment when Norman surprises him by

establishing the means of a permanent water supply on the driest part of his cattle station, named Red Ochre. The novel explicitly identifies this as proof of the boy's genius:

genius was what Oscar thought it was and what he described it as when proudly discussing it with the many people whom it interested. The genius of Young Yeller Shillingsworth, as Norman was now being called abroad, soon became famous, and was the cause of the coming of many people to the Station to see the evidence of it.⁴⁴

Norman's invention is likened to a Midas-like magical device for converting dry-season cattle carcasses into gold, in contrast to the expensive and rather useless hydro-electric plant that his father, Mark Shillingsworth, has erected at his camp on the island of Flying Fox.⁴⁵

It is clear that Norman does not inherit his genius from his father. Herbert did originally conceive of Mark literally as 'an artist at heart', but he cut that from the manuscript before he published the novel, leaving the more satirical reference to his 'rather Heath-Robinson design' skills.⁴⁶ Norman's design is simple and based on careful environmental observations; Mark's design is intricate, costly and ingenious, but also useless, because it only works when the tide is running (which is when it is least needed). Norman's 'masterpiece' design is site-specific. It takes advantage of the existing landform, erecting a shed of boughs over moisture-bearing rock to prevent evaporation and then 'scoring the rock with a vein-like system of channels, innumerable tiny ones running obliquely, converging, and joining large perpendiculars, and so on, down to the base, where it concluded in a trough cut out of the rock itself and concreted'.⁴⁷ Mark's hydro-plant is apparently transportable but in reality works nowhere.

In this way Herbert distinguishes between ingenuity and genius, which is to say between false and true genius. Real genius, he suggests, is a force of nature, and is associated with a deep sense of place, or knowledge of country. The expression of Norman's genius relies on environmental observation and understanding, accommodating culture to nature, which puts Herbert way ahead of his time. The novel's most fulsome enthusiast in praise of Norman's genius, a grazier on the neighbouring Gunamiah Station, is Andy McRandy, whom many critics regard as a thinly veiled mouthpiece for the author's own views.⁴⁸ Genius, as McRandy sees it, is racially inherited. The previous owner of McRandy's station, Jock Driver, had bought Mark Shillingsworth's hydro-plant and transferred to it Gunamiah. McRandy takes Norman on a tour of the property and shows him 'the decayed remains' of his father's invention, clearly suggesting that his European ancestry is irrelevant to the making of his genius. In fact, these rusting ruins are the explicit symbol of his father's bargain with Driver—the sweetener of the deal—his discarding of Norman to serve as cheap child labour in one of the grazier's stock camps. So, obviously, the boy's genius must come from his Aboriginal side. As McRandy tells him: 'Only one whiteman in a million is any more clever when he's born than the average black piccanin. And you may bet your boots that some of the piccanins have genius too, or how come their people to possess such clever contraptions as the spear-thrower and the boomerang?'⁴⁹

Herbert had long been fascinated by the theme of exotic (or illicit) love. His first experience of it was in the cinema, watching Rudolph Valentino and Agnes Ayres in the film adaptation of E.M. Hull's sado-masochistic romance of the desert, *The Sheik* (1919).⁵⁰ In *Capricornia*, at the New Year's party, Sidney Gigney appears as a sheik and is surprised when Norman does not upstage him in similarly themed fancy dress—though Rhoda Norse thinks that Gigney might have been better presented as a eunuch.⁵¹ But the more immediate literary inspiration for the relationship in *Capricornia* between Mark Shillingsworth and the Aboriginal woman, Marowallua, was Leon Gordon's play *White Cargo*, and its pre-text, Ida Vera Simonton's

novel *Hell's Playground*.⁵² The overarching theme of both is 'the debauching life of the African tropics'.⁵³ What was radical about them was their open acknowledgment of the sexual dynamics that had underpinned the expansion of Europe. They dramatised a psycho-sexual dimension of colonialism that had been hitherto repressed in Australia's thinking on its history, the inevitability of sex as a diversion from monotony. More importantly, they linked this sexualised history of Empire to the problematic of race relations. Race was (and unfortunately still is) widely accepted as a biologically determined aspect of identity. But *White Cargo* defined it quite explicitly according to matrilineal precept—'Woman is Race'—or, as explicitly put in the title, the carrier of race.⁵⁴ In 1926, in Sydney alone, one hundred and fifty thousand people are estimated to have seen the play and its sexual thesis of colonialism in the tropics was hotly debated in the local press.⁵⁵ Some dismissed it as a misrepresentation, 'a fantasy of the Cockney imagination'.⁵⁶ Others were more sanguine, but also confused, for they had difficulty explaining the sexual power of the native woman of the tropics, regarding her 'a heroine out of the *Thousand and One Nights*'.⁵⁷ Herbert appears to have adopted this prevailing Orientalist view and he also took on board the play's gendering of race. The 'genius of race' is a complicated trope, which, as Hortense Spillers argues, demonstrates both 'the power and danger of difference', and 'signs and assigns difference as a way to situate social subjects'.⁵⁸ In Herbert's view the genius of race was carried through the mother, or was female derived. His creole character heroes—Norman in *Capricornia*, Prindy in *Poor Fellow My Country*—are of course male, but their creative potential comes from their mothers, who represent their Aboriginality.

Early in 1935, in a private lament written in the agony of waiting and wondering if *Capricornia* would ever be published, and thinking over how he had already 'half-killed himself for his genius', Herbert came to a startling conclusion: 'My genius is not I.'⁵⁹ This was a moment of self-othering, in which he recognised 'the god within'—the driving force of his originality and individuality—as a stranger. The estrangement was, as he saw it, the consequence of his social positioning, the way he was viewed by others, in the predominantly unsympathetic Darwin society. Herbert seems to have realised that, if his genius was socially and culturally determined, it must be beyond his control. The defining symbolism of this epiphany would shape his destiny: the objective correlative of his self-othering, as he saw it, was the socially marginalised half-caste Aboriginal subject whom he regarded as the True Father and the ideal nation, the True Commonwealth, and the Genii Loci of the Loved Land, Terra Australis.

Herbert had relocated from Sydney to Darwin in 1935 to escape the overpowering influence of his prospective publisher, P.R. Stephensen. He'd got a job as the Acting Superintendent of the Kahlin Aboriginal Compound and he was hoping to make it permanent; he was also hoping for pre-selection with the Labor Party. Then, out of the blue, he received a package in the mail from Stephensen containing his manifesto, *The Foundations of Culture in Australia*, the opening chapter of which is titled 'Genius of the Place'.⁶⁰ Stephensen's interest in Aboriginal people had lessened as Herbert's had grown. His Australia was a New Britannia, not the Creole Nation Herbert envisaged. 'We are not Australians, Inky', Herbert told him:

Only these lucky people ['Euraustralians' he called them] are ... I love them, & envy them their nationality. Curse the fates that arranged that I should be born a colonial Pommy! God help me, & all like me who were conceived [sic] by a Dreaming-Place Spirit & born a foreigner.⁶¹

Indigenous Australia was obliterated by Stephensen's ideal of the nation. To Herbert, it provided a gateway. At times he worried that he was 'perversely insane'. At other times, he knew that this was a pose. But in the era of assimilation, how was a life of masks to be avoided? He was an unpublished writer in an uncultured frontier town, a lapsed Catholic who lived with a Jew, ostracised by whites, in charge of blacks, and it is little wonder that he felt constantly diminished. If only he could stabilise his sense of self. It helped for him to think of himself as a victim of mismatched identity, a biological error unacknowledged by science—an Aboriginal genius trapped in a white man's body. Identity was conscious theatre. On good days, he could stand back and cheer his performance as a 'most interesting and surprising cove', 'extraordinarily open-minded', with a burning 'flame of intelligence'. On bad days, the idea of mental disorder gave relief and refuge. Mobility and masks were insufficient.⁶² He forgot his authority and imagined himself an inmate of the Compound. He took an Aboriginal woman as his lover. And he wrote to Stephensen: 'Imagine "Capricornia" written by a Halfcaste!'⁶³

Clearly Herbert's idea of genius had begun to shift. How could he ever be original if he were not at least in part Aboriginal? His answer was love. Until now his idea of the True Commonwealth had been broadly socialist, but the nation of reconciled racial difference that he now envisaged—the Creole Nation—was one spiritualised by the genius of love, which, as he saw it, was the Indigenous genius loci. And this is where it all started to go wrong...

After *Capricornia*, and his experience of fame, after the incarceration of his publisher as a threat to national security, and after his own completely debilitating experience of military service in World War II, Herbert withdrew from society and isolated himself almost completely to avoid confusion and distraction. He closed himself within, self-reflecting and loveless. He became more interested in knowing himself than in knowing others, and as this inevitably distorted his sense of self, he was more and more frustrated and fearful of failure. He was torn between the tutelary spirit of his imagination, his good genius, and the destructive capacities of his evil genius—self-interest, resentment and anger rather than empathy. His genius became his enemy, like Charles Ket, the evil genius or alter ego of Norman Shillingsworth in *Capricornia*, a character who lives in constant shame and fear, an illegitimate and an outcast, full of hatred for both 'half-castes' and 'full-bloods' (who remind him of his own illegitimacy).

Every day Herbert tried to convince himself anew of his own happiness. In an effort to secure that happiness he appointed Sadie as the Custodian of his Genius. She seemed the perfect choice, for she had the 'native genius' of being Jewish. He neglects ever to list the qualities that define that genius, but it is clearly a racialised notion. Creativity was probably the key characteristic. Thorstein Veblen believed Jewish genius to be a product of marginalisation. Jews were outsiders, disturbing elements, often estranged from their own communities. Their genius was that of 'the homeless mind'.⁶⁴ Freud (on the other hand) put the case for Jewish genius in terms of the choice to worship an invisible God, 'subordinating sense perception to an abstract idea'.⁶⁵ Both were choices that Herbert made: homelessness and the renunciation of the world in favour of a metaphysical working out of his identity. But as much as he loved and revered Sadie, there were times when she seemed not to understand his genius, when he mistreated her abominably, worrying that she might be a projection of his own evil genius, luring him toward damnation. Yet it reached a point where, without her, he could not write at all. Certainly *Poor Fellow My Country* would have remained just one more stalled novel, like its several unpublished predecessors, if not for her standing by him. Without her love, he probably would not even have written *Capricornia*, balancing the hatred and negativity that

had apparently characterised his rejected novel, 'Black Velvet', with his deep love of the land, and his dreaming of Australia Felix, the Happy South Land.⁶⁶

Since Herbert's death, and the minor industry of Herbert scholarship that has followed it, he has, as Robert Darby notes in his review of Frances de Groen's biography, been convicted 'of nearly all the seven deadly sins, barring sloth and gluttony'.⁶⁷ De Groen describes in often painful detail his displays of aggression, anger, ingratitude, manipulation, egocentrism, homophobia, racism and, above all, misogyny.⁶⁸ Sean Monahan, author of the one extended critical study of Herbert's writing, laments the failure of the biography to acknowledge Herbert's positive achievements but ends up disliking him just the same.⁶⁹ As Harry Hesletine said in his review of Monahan's book:

The case for the real genius of Xavier Herbert is not ... [assisted by] what appears to be the critic's increasing dislike for his author. On p. 95, for instance, Monahan identifies 'Herbert's twisted attitudes to women'. On the following page the focus shifts to 'self-centredness on a grand scale'. As the study progresses, Monahan reports his repulsion at, among other traits, Herbert's arrogance, his unconscious racism, his unquestioning assumption of masculine superiority. Much (if not most) of what he holds against Herbert is almost certainly true. But it does not lay a very happy foundation for the argument which occupies the last third of the book—that *Poor Fellow My Country* is a masterpiece.⁷⁰

But the worst of his vices, as Darby says, 'appeared only after the success of *Capricornia* and, more precisely, in the 1950s, when nothing seemed to be going right for him'.⁷¹ (Of course the documentary record of his early years is also far less complete.) It was then that he began prescribing and injecting himself with steroids, for the purpose not only of maintaining his vigorous masculinity into old age but also to maintain his creative vitality, his genius. Over the next thirty years of that continuing drug regime he became more angry, aggressive and paranoid. Thus the dislike of him as a subject is at least in part a response to the drug-induced psychopathology in his later life, which made him less tolerant but also possibly enhanced his creative performance.

In an age when steroid abuse is increasing worldwide we do know that more and more athletes are presenting with psychiatric symptoms and disorders of mood destabilisation, including hypomania and, in the long term, depression. I'm not excusing Herbert's difficulties as a subject, or the contradictions of his writing. Manning Clark was obviously correct when he said that Herbert wrote 'with the passion of a great lover and a great hater'.⁷² But it is his hate that seems to be what we now recall. It's unfortunate that the fascinations of Herbert's psychopathology, partly brought on by drug abuse in his later life, seems to emphasise this hating at the expense of his loving. The limits of love depend upon the capacity for empathy, and in the twenty-first century empathy is an undervalued virtue. It is also a vital one. Prejudice—the inability to identify with another person—has always been damaging, on any scale. But with the growth of the global economy binding different peoples and different nations more closely together, and with environmental degradation and climate change throwing human and non-human destinies into the one balance, a closer reading of Herbert shows his commitment to exposing prejudice as the biggest threat to national peace and prosperity—with empathy counterposed as its greatest hope for salvation. Indeed, Herbert devoted his life's work to exploring the interplay of prejudice and empathy, and to envisioning the emotional states and social destinies that would inevitably arise from the sacrifice of either

one to the other. The tragic vision of his work builds inexorably from failures in the processes of reconciliation, not only in society but in his own sense of self. Sexism and racism derive from the same core belief system about difference; and there can be no denying that Herbert's work is compromised by attitudes that he could diagnose savagely in others but could not overcome in himself, and which led to self-hatred.

Nation-oriented writers are less popular today than they once were. Literary and cultural critics seem more interested in transnational writers, those who leave rather than stay, writers who explore border crossing, networking, translation, global and/or diasporic forms of writing (and identity). The Chinese-Australian poet Ouyang Yu was apparently so incensed reading *Poor Fellow My Country* that he wrote a poem titled 'An Aboriginal Tale', in which an Aboriginal reader dreams of making a statement by mailing photocopies of the most offensive pages to Xavier Herbert, who of course by this time is no longer living. Then Ouyang Yu translated the entire novel of *Capricornia* into Chinese.⁷³ Yu has pointed out that none of the books on Xavier Herbert published since his death indexes words like Asian, Chinese or 'multicultural', and he finds the dice unfairly loaded against Charles Ket, because he is not only part-Aboriginal, but also part-Chinese, making him 'a double half-caste', and hence no match for Norman Shillingsworth, who of course is part-white.⁷⁴ But Ouyang Yu forgets that it was not until the 1970s that multicultural policies began to reimagine and reshape Australian society, and that Herbert's immigrant forebears, having struggled on the Australian goldfields in vain to make their fortune, like many others blamed their failures on the Chinese.

One of the most damning sins of which Herbert has been accused since his death is plagiarism. His chief prosecutor in this regard is the well-known anthropologist Basil Sansom, who charges him with being a 'looter' of Aboriginal culture, only pretending to original genius—an unethical counterfeiter.⁷⁵ The charge is particularly relevant to the issue of Herbert's lasting value as a writer because, as Sansom observes, while the novels he wrote between *Capricornia* and *Poor Fellow My Country* were his worst, the short stories he wrote over that time were often his best. Worse still, what Herbert is said to have plagiarised is not simply a form of words, an idea or a story. Rather, Sansom vilifies Herbert as 'a looter of dreamings'; a 'whitefella author' who took 'the secret motor' of an Indigenous story form and used it, without acknowledgement, not just as the driver within one of his own stories, but for all of his subsequent literary productions. Sansom finds Herbert guilty of racialised plagiarism, committing systematic epistemic violence against Aboriginal people, all of which of course invalidates any claims made to his genius, by himself or others.

The Indigenous story form Herbert is accused of pirating is the irruption story, which Sansom first encountered during fieldwork in the Daly River area. It is characterised, he tells us, by the sudden incursion of Dreaming into postcolonial history, an act of intervention by an Indigenous Ancestor that occurs always at a crucial moment in the narrative, and which turns the action to Dreaming purpose, ultimately resolving it in a way that re-asserts 'some eternal verity of sacred truth'.⁷⁶ The prosecution of Herbert rests largely on the evidence of the story widely regarded as his best, certainly his most widely translated and anthologised: 'Kaijek the Songman'.⁷⁷ It was first published in 1941. By that time, of course, *Capricornia* had been published to great acclaim, and Herbert was famous. He had started a passionate but ultimately disastrous affair with Dymphna Cusack. He had started writing a new novel but had lost his way. Fame, and the confusions of World War II, had derailed his literary career. In 'Kaijek the Songman' he cast himself as 'the most famous songman in the land'.⁷⁸ But at the beginning of the story he is wandering the wilderness devoid of inspiration, 'wretched ... in his impotence'⁷⁹ and weighed down by the expectations of his people, for he is scheduled

to perform soon at an important corroboree, a great ceremony of initiation. Crashing up river through a tangle of wrecked grass and trees after the storm the previous night, he seems doomed to repeat Norman Shillingsworth's flight from the truth of his Aboriginal heritage in *Capricornia*. Lost in the bush, Norman loses his way and almost drowns. His Aboriginal awakening, channelling the Spirit of the Land through the Song of the Golden Beetle, proves tragically inadequate. But Kaijek does find inspiration for the new song his people expect from him. How he finds it is typical of Herbert's ironical mode of discourse. Kaijek stumbles upon gold in the roots of a fallen river gum—or, to be precise, Ninyul ('his woman'), directs him to it.⁸⁰ They show their find to the previously menacing white feller in his camp nearby, hoping now to change his mind about giving them some tobacco, and they witness his immediate transformation; stricken with the white feller disease of gold fever, he tells them now to take whatever they like. After they have gorged themselves on bully beef, hot damper and treacle, swilled billy tea and taken turns about with the tobacco pipe, suddenly Kaijek leaps up and begins to sing. Then, having found his new song, he and Ninyul make their way toward the initiation grounds. The psychological allegory of the piece, however, is of Herbert himself finding the inspiration to write a new story, worthy of the expectations placed upon him by his readership. Sansom puts it like this: 'Kaijek's Newsong Story is the story of the "finding" of an irruption story by a man figured by Xavier Herbert as the most famous Aboriginal Singingman in the Australian North.'⁸¹

As an anthropologist, reading the story for what he alleges has been left out it by an act of deliberate deception, Sansom locates the irruption in the uprooting of the river gum, which is the action that enables the finding of both the gold and the inspiration for the song.

For those who can read the signs, the fallen river gum is no mere tree. Storm of the night before Kaijek's discovery was a tempest inhabited by a Storm-wind Dreaming (it is thus with all great storms). Fall of the imposing river gum came of the force visited by a Storm-wind of the Dreaming on a Dreaming Tree. And it was a Power out of the Dreaming (perhaps a third and ancestral Power) that brought Kaijek and Ninyul to the toppled tree and acted later on to give Kaijek both words and tune for the 'What Name? Song'. Words and tune would have come to Kaijek through his Dreaming-acute ear. He would 'hear' from the Dreaming and not, Christian and Semitic way, receive the gift of song through inspiration—which is an in-breathing of words carried on the received breath of the Divine.⁸²

If one were looking for extra-textual corroboration of this alleged theft, again one might look to Herbert's private correspondence. In 1934, for instance, not long before his self-othering epiphany ('my genius is not I') he was feeling 'utterly lost in the civilisation of literature', doubting that he would ever enjoy a 'civilised' readership.⁸³ Like his Jindyworobak counterparts in Adelaide, he imagined himself 'in the thrall of chyringos'.⁸⁴ Unlike them, he lamented: 'I am uncivilised.'⁸⁵ It was soon after this that he landed the job of Acting Superintendent of Darwin's Aboriginal Compound, and Sadie, his partner, became Matron of the Halfcaste Home. They lived on site in the cottage provided, and they grew accustomed to the singing after dark and the drone of the didjeridoo. *Capricornia* is filled with song—bush ballads, hymns, political anthems, the begging songs of frogs, siren songs of the silver creeks, and of course the Golden Beetle's song. But in the compound Herbert found 'a very sweet little song' from Arnhem Land, which he proposed explicitly 'to plagiarise'.⁸⁶ We don't know what that song was. But it's clear that he saw no contradiction between his pursuit of original genius and this kind of bootlegging.

It has been fashionable for some time now, as Graham Huggan observes, to see this sort of Jindyworobakism ‘as a kind of misguided antipodean primitivism, loosely adopting half-digested theories about Aborigines and other “primitive” peoples and incorporating these into a white-dominated nationalist aesthetic’ that Brian Elliott labels ‘dreamtime nationalism’.⁸⁷ Like Herbert, they are accused of ‘a Promethean transgression’ against Aboriginal culture, and dismissed for their naive Orientalism.⁸⁸ Still, Herbert’s use of Australia’s Indigenous oral literature raises fundamental questions about the relation between race and literary property. The use of black traditions was of course central to white modernism. As Michael North argues in *The Dialect of Modernism*, ‘linguistic mimicry and racial masquerade were not just shallow fads but strategies without which modernism could not have arisen. Writers as far from Harlem as T.S. Eliot and Gertrude Stein reimagined themselves as black, wrote in a black voice, and used that voice to transform the literature of their time.’⁸⁹ Neil Mudge has written about the colour patterning in *Capricornia*⁹⁰ and I have demonstrated elsewhere how the vacillation of the mixed-race characters between the poles of their divided ancestry, their identifying either as black or white (but never as both) is coded both by metaphor (dingo/kangaroo) and by colour.⁹¹ These are characters for whom the question of origin is supremely problematic, having been racialised by both prejudice and official policy. Herbert’s own solution to the problem—which the social realities within his fiction prevent his characters from discovering—is a kind of creole positivism by which he does try at least to identify as both black and white. Sansom argues that Herbert’s story ‘calls for an appreciation of the contrast between blackfella and whitefella valuations of that which is to be held dear’. Although ‘Kaijek the Songman’ may not elaborate the core contrast between Things of Dreaming (song) and Things of Capital (gold) as clearly or as fully as the anthropologist might wish, what both the story and the song are about is the irreconcilability of Indigenous and non-Indigenous value systems. The turning point of its action—the point where the irruption occurs—is the moment of contact, when Kaijek asks the whitefella’s name and is refused. It is the moment of culture clash, the reverse image of the Coming of the Dingoes in *Capricornia*. Following Sansom’s argument, we might see the Death of the Dingo in that novel, when Ned Krater’s ship is wrecked in a cyclone, as another irruption by a Storm Wind of the Dreaming. Similarly we might read the redemptive murder of Tim O’Cannon in *Capricornia* in terms brought about by an irruption of Buffalo Dreaming, since the metaphorical nature of the train-as-charging-bull is well established. In other words, it is not—as Sansom contends—only after the writing of Kaijek that Herbert began to think in this way.

In any case, as Sansom admits, the Indigenous irruption story is not a ‘classic’ form of Indigenous literature. It is a post-contact genre, ‘produced out of historical necessity to deal with the impasse in relationships between coloniser and the colonised’.⁹² It emerges out of a blocked dialogue, ‘a counter-positioning of values that can in no way be reconciled’.⁹³ There are two aspects to this colonial impasse, as Sansom sees it: there are its rival truths and behind those truths there are its patrons’ powers (or rival geniuses). In irruption stories ‘Dreaming always triumphs’.⁹⁴ In the terms of Sansom’s argument, Herbert’s co-option of that triumph for his own ends then can only be seen as a betrayal of Aboriginal people.

But is this the only reading? Herbert’s adaptation of Indigenous oral literature might also be seen as a strategy that seeks to reconcile two contradictory concepts, Indigenous authenticity and non-Indigenous originality.⁹⁵ The artist, according to Wilson Harris, is both yin and yang, a conduit for the genius of love. Metaphor is what gives that genius its power, a seismic force which, in times of crisis, erupts through the apparently compulsory orders of experience to enable a paradoxical or riddling vision of the mutuality of opposites. The

potential for genuine change depends entirely upon our recognition of and response to that riddle, or intimation.⁹⁶

I'm going to close this essay with the set piece that opens *Poor Fellow My Country*, where the boy genius Prindy is fishing by a billabong. In the symbolic order of *Poor Fellow My Country* fishing is the ecological opposite of mining. A golden flicker arises slowly from the emerald depths of the waterhole; as it comes into focus the boy sees that it is a catfish. In Herbert's bestiary compound creatures like this (cat plus fish) are always more than the sum of their parts. The catfish is a creature of creole vision. If and when it breaks through the surface reflections of the novel's social reality, it must cause a moment of painful symbolic rupture, such as Norman experiences in *Capricornia* when he realises he has been living the lie of a whitefella. In psychoanalytic terms this rupture would mark the end of alienation from the other. It would lead to a rethinking of history, and a rebellion against the authoritative order; it would mark the beginning of real self-development, which is the enabling of genius—the moment of resistance.

As I said in my introduction to the fortieth-anniversary edition of *Poor Fellow My Country*:

The continuing relevance of that novel—and of *Capricornia* also—is not contained in its reinterpretation of a particular set of events or a period of Australian history, however important that may have seemed in the 1930s and the 1970s. It is that it draws us into a process of identity formation whereby we become aware of how we experience nationality, depending on whether we are white or black or other, how we experience belonging or alienation or asylum, the states of being in between—and how that process affects who we really are, individually and as a collectivity.⁹⁷

If books are machines to think with, Herbert has much to tell us still about the social function and community value of art, the seductions of personality (individual and collective), and the difficulties of reconciliation.

About the author

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Notes

1. See Marilla North, *Yarn Spinners: A Story in Letters*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 2001, p. 64.
2. Beatrice Davis to Xavier Herbert, 1 February 1974, Sadie and Xavier Herbert Collection. UQFL 83, Box 26A.
3. Frances De Groen, *Xavier Herbert: A Biography*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 1999, back cover blurb.
4. Darrin M. McMahon, *Divine Fury: A History of Genius*, Basic Books, New York, 2013, p. xi.
5. Cecil Mann, 'The Lawson Legend', *The Bulletin*, vol. 80, no. 4131, 15 April 1959, pp. 11–45.

6. Kevin Brophy, 'On Recognising Collaboration', *Axon: Creative Explorations. The Poetics of Collaboration*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2016, <http://www.axonjournal.com.au/issue-10/recognising-collaboration>.
7. Jen Webb and Monica Carroll, 'A Seethe of Poets: Creativity and Community', *TEXT Special Issue 40: Making It New: Finding Contemporary Meanings for Creativity*, April 2017, <http://www.textjournal.com.au/speciss/issue40/Webb&Carroll>.
8. Geraldine Stone, 'Australia Has Not So Far Produced One Writer of Genius', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 March 1985, p. 40.
9. Jennifer Sexton, 'Why Bother with Patrick White', *The Weekend Australian*, 15–16 July 2006, p. 21.
10. Marcia Langton and Mick Gooda, quoted by Gabrielle Murphy, 'Rolled Gold Genius', <https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/a-rolled-gold-genius>.
11. Alexis Wright, 'Language and Empire. The Empires of the East Have Crumbled into Dust, But the English Language Remains', presentation at Brisbane Writers Festival, 7 September, 1997. Quoted by Anita Heiss, *Dhuuluu-Yala: To Talk Straight—Publishing Indigenous Literature*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 2003, p. 29.
12. Herbert's personal copy of the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* is in the author's possession, to be placed in the Australian National Library.
13. The surviving manuscript of *Capricornia*, now in the National Library, is a compilation from various drafts. We know Herbert started writing the novel in England, after the failure of 'Black Velvet' to attract a publisher, and after he met his future life partner Sarah (Sadie) Cohen (nee Norden). Surviving fragments of an apparently very early draft (perhaps 'Black Velvet'), written on the backs of some of pages of the compiled manuscript, reveal that the Shillingsworth brothers were originally called the Coxen brothers. This early nomenclature combines Sadie's married name ('Cohen') with the name of the street ('Cox Street') where she had lived with her husband in Bondi.
14. *Les Mille et Une Nuits, contes arabes traduits en français*, 12 vol. [vol. 1–10, 1704–12; vol. 11 and 12, 1717], trans. Antoine Galland, Editions Garnier and Brothers, Paris, 1949.
15. Some scholars, however, believe that the word 'jinn' derives from Aramaic, and was used by Christians to designate pagan gods reduced to the status of demons, only being introduced into Arabic folklore in the late pre-Islamic era. Irving M. Zeitlin, *The Historical Muhammad*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2007, pp.59–60.
16. For example, Joseph Addison, 'On Genius' (1711); David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748); William Sharpe, *A Dissertation upon Genius* (1755); Edmund Burke, *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756); Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft [The Critique of Judgment]* (1790).
17. *Edward Young's Conjectures on Original Composition*, ed. Edith J. Morley, Manchester University Press, Manchester 1918, p. 15.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
19. *Ibid.*
20. Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1991, p. 62. The generative aspect of genius—as a function of the 'productive imagination' (as opposed to the mimetic)—returns us to its Latin root (*gen*): 'to be born; to beget; to come into being'. See Paul Bruno, *Kant's Concept of Genius*, Continuum International Publishing Group, New York, 2010, p. 9.
21. See John Carson, *The Measure of Merit: Talents, Intelligence, and Inequality in the French and American Republics, 1750–1940*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 2007.
22. See Janet Browne, 'Inspiration to Perspiration: Francis Galton's Hereditary Genius in Victorian Context', in *Genealogies of Genius*, ed. Joyce E. Chaplin and Darrin M. McMahon Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, Hampshire 2016, pp. 77–96.
23. See for example: Herbert, *Letters to 'Arthur' [Dibley], 'Copeland,' nd [1934]*, *Herbert Papers, ANL 758*; to Stephensen, 'Box 129, Darwin, Monday,' nd [December, 1936], *P.R. Stephensen Papers, Mitchell Library, MSS 1284 Y2117*.
24. See John Hetherington, to Herbert, 12 April 1961, UQFL 83, Box 27.
25. W.B. Yeats, 'The Second Coming', in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*, Dundrum, Cuala, 1921, p. 19.
26. A. Antonielli, 'William Butler Yeats's "The Symbolic System of William Blake"', *Estudios Irlandeses*, no. 3, 2008, pp. 10–28.
27. Xavier Herbert, *Disturbing Element*, Fontana, Melbourne, 1963, p. 63.
28. Jorge Luis Borges, 'The Thousand and One Nights', *Seven Nights*, trans. Eliot Weinberger, New Directions Books, New York, 1984, p. 57.
29. Herbert, *Disturbing Element*, p. 207.

30. Ibid., p. 73.
31. Derrida's reconfiguration of Plato's Phaedrus, in his essay 'Plato's Pharmacy,' identifies the figure of the pharmakos doubly as a scapegoat (healer) and magician (poisoner). Derrida focuses on the indeterminate status of the figure, as both inside and outside the community he/she represents. Jacques Derrida, *Disseminations*, trans. Barbara Johnson, University of Chicago, Chicago, 1981, p. 99.
32. Herbert, *Literary Log* [unnumbered], 18 December, [1953], UQFL 83, Box 3.
33. Xavier Herbert, *Poor Fellow My Country*, Collins, Sydney, 1975, p. 240.
34. Jeanine Leane, 'Tracking Our Country in Settler Literature', *JASAL: Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2014, p. 6.
35. As Jared Sexton explains in 'Life with No Hoop: Black Pride, State Power', in *Commodified and Criminalized: New Racism and African Americans in Contemporary Sports*, ed. David J. Leonard and C. Richard King, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, New York, 2010, p. 227: 'The genius of race [is] ... "a complicated figure, or metaphoricity, that demonstrates the power and danger of difference, that signs and assigns difference as a way to situate social subjects"'. Sexton is quoting Hortense Spillers, 'All the things you could be by now, if Sigmund Freud's wife was your mother: Psychoanalysis and Race', *Boundary 2*, vol. 23, no. 3, pp. 81–90.
36. Herbert, *Poor Fellow My Country*, p. 472.
37. Xavier Herbert, 'Machinations of a Jinx', *Australian Journal*, 1 October 1933, pp. 1210–15; slightly rev., *The Publicist*, 1 December 1938, pp. 8–11, rpt in *South of Capricornia, Short Stories 1925–1934* by Xavier Herbert, ed. Russell McDougall, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1990, pp. 431–40. References are to the original publication.
38. Xavier Herbert, 'Sequel to a Song', *Larger Than Life*, Fontana, Melbourne, 1963, p. 1–17.
39. See Russell McDougall, 'Capricornia: Recovering the Imaginative Vision of a Polemical Novel', *Australian Literary Studies*, vol. 10, no. 1, 1981, pp. 28–39.
40. Xavier Herbert, *Capricornia*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1949, p. 190.
41. Ibid., p. 167.
42. Ibid., p. 199.
43. Ibid., p. 200.
44. Ibid., pp. 277–8.
45. This is particularly interesting in view of the fact that, at the time, when the industrial world was turning to oil—and it seemed Australia had no oil wells—the dominant domestic political belief was that hydroelectricity schemes (such as those that had been established on a small scale in Tasmania) were too costly to be practical. At the opening of the 1930s the Hume Weir had been under construction for more than a decade and the idea that a power station might be established to produce hydroelectricity from it seemed little more than a pipe dream. It was widely held that the more economically viable energy alternative was shale oil extraction. In fact the shale oil industry in Australia was one of the oldest industries and Capricornia provides ample evidence of just how culturally embedded its products had become. Kerosene lamps light the darkness; kerosene fuels land and sea transport; kerosene mixed with water provides alcoholic beverages. Kerosene cases are building blocks for makeshift furniture; flattened kerosene cans are a crucial important supplementary material for waterproofing temporary shelters modelled on the traditional Aboriginal humpy of tree branches and bark; kerosene cans serve as percussive instruments in the rough and ready entertainment culture of the bush; they even provide cut-out decorations for the coffins of the dead—although Herbert presents this as an indication of the undertaker's greed rather than his genius.
46. W. Heath Robinson was a popular British cartoonist and illustrator famed for his drawings of absurdly ingenious yet patently impractical devices. His name became part of the vernacular and was included in the dictionary from 1912 as a synonym for machines like the ones he spent his life designing.
47. Herbert, *Capricornia*, p. 278.
48. This is not entirely true. For example, along with his speechifying about pride in the Aboriginal ancestors, McRandy espouses a eugenics model of social engineering that has Cecil Cook, the Chief Protector of the time, written all over it. Herbert disavowed the policy of removing mixed-race children from their parent(s). But at the same time he told his friend Arthur Dibley: 'There is no hope for us, except that we pass our poor Aboriginal souls through a lubra into a yellor-feller—a true Australian.' This is why he names the man 'McRandy', and gives him a rotating harem of Aboriginal women (of whom every one is named 'Velvet'). See n. 43.
49. Herbert, *Capricornia*, p. 326.
50. Xavier Herbert, 'A Book Called Capricornia,' unpublished typescript in the author's possession, p. 21.

51. Another feature of the novel's Orientalism is the slippage between eroticism and exoticism. Herbert uses the word 'erotic' only once and it is to indicate Gigney's choice of fancy dress: sheiks are 'erotic' characters. Similarly, he also uses the word 'exotic' only once, with reference to the masking of Constance Differ as a Javan princess, 'exotic enough to spice desiring her with the barbarity of comboing, ordinary enough to save spice from suspicion of being poison'. *Capricornia*, pp. 283, 102.
52. For an extended discussion see Russell McDougall, 'The Intertexts of *Capricornia*', in *The Shadow of the Precursor*, ed. Diana Glen et al., Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 2012, pp. 69–73.
53. Vera Simonton, *Hell's Playground*, BiblioLife, Charleston SC, 2009, p. 7.
54. Leon Gordon, *White Cargo*, The Four Seas Company, Africa, 1925, p. 29.
55. Feng-Shui, 'Counterfeit White Cargo', *The Bulletin*, 8 July 1926, p. 12.
56. Feng Shui, *The Bulletin*, 12 August 1926, p. 34.
57. *Bulletin*, 1 July 1926.
58. Hortense Spillers, 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book', in *Hortense Spillers, Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1996, p. 80.
59. Xavier Herbert, to 'My Dear' [Dibley], 'Darwin, Sunday' [May 1935], ANL MS 758.s.
60. P.R. Stephensen, *Foundations of Culture in Australia*, W.J. Miles, Gordon, NSW, 1936.
61. *Ibid.*
62. Xavier Herbert, to 'Dearest Man' [Dibley], 'Monday Night', n.d. [April 1936], NLA MS 758.
63. Xavier Herbert, to 'My dear Inky' [Stephensen], 'Aboriginal Compound, Darwin, Tuesday', n.d. [May 1936], P.R. Stephensen Papers, Mitchell Library, ML MSS 1284, Y2142.
64. Thorstein Veblen, *Essays In Our Changing Order*, The Viking Press, New York 1943, p. 227.
65. Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. Katherine Jones, Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, London, 1939, p. 178.
66. By the author's own admission, 'Black Velvet' was a collection of all of the 'nasty bits of history', violent, determinedly sensational and without any humour. Xavier Herbert, 'Me and My Shadow', unpublished typescript, in private hands, p. 31; Interviewed by Elizabeth Riddell, 16 February 1975, UQFL 83, Box 60, pp. 3–5.
67. Robert Darby, 'Wrestling with Old Horrible', *Eureka Street*, vol. 9, no. 4, 1999, p. 32.
68. De Groen, Xavier Herbert.
69. Sean Monahan, *A Long and Winding Road: Xavier Herbert's Literary Journey*, University of Western Australia Press, Perth, 2003.
70. Harry Heseltine, Review of *A Long and Winding Road: Xavier Herbert's Literary Journey*, *Australian Literary Studies*, vol. 21, no. 3, 2004, pp. 398–9.
71. Darby, p.33.
72. Manning Clark, 'Artist Turns to Angry Prophet', *Canberra Times*, 12 September 1975, p. 10.
73. Ouyang Yu, 'An Aboriginal Tale', in *Kingsbury Tales*, Brandl & Schlesinger, Blackheath, 2008, pp. 21–2; Xavier Herbert, *Kapulikeniya: Capricornia*, trans. Ouyang Yu, Chongqing chu ban she, Chongqing, 2004.
74. Ouyang Yu, *Chinese in Australian Fiction, 1888–1988*, Cambria Press, Amherst, NY, 2008.
75. Basil Sansom, 'Looter of the Dreamings: Xavier Herbert and the Taking of Kaijek's Newsong Story', *Oceania*, vol. 76, no. 1, 2006, pp. 83–104.
76. *Ibid.*, p. 86.
77. Xavier Herbert, 'Kaijek the Songman,' in *Larger Than Life*, pp. 235–41.
78. *Ibid.*, p. 236.
79. *Ibid.*
80. Sansom rightly notes that 'Ninyul' is named after the wife of Herbert's Aboriginal friend Bulbul. But the character is based on Herbert's own partner, 'Sadie', whom he appointed as the custodian of his genius.
81. Sansom, p. 86.
82. *Ibid.*, p. 91.
83. Herbert, Letter to Dibley, nd [1934], ANL MS 758

84. Herbert, to Dibley, nd [1934], ANL MS 758. Note that Herbert's spelling of the Aranda word tjuringa (a sacred ceremonial object) as 'chyringos' is untraceable to its source.
85. Herbert, to Dibley, nd [1934], ANL MS 758.
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