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Kunapipi

Volume 34 | Issue 2

Article 17

2012

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Recommended Citation

Ashcroft, Bill, Colonisation and Speciesism: Jules Verne's The Mysterious Island, *Kunapipi*, 34(2), 2012.
Available at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol34/iss2/17>

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Abstract

Ever since Thomas More's Utopia islands have been primary sites for utopias, and the perfect location for the demonstration of the benefits of colonisation. From Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* in 1719 the moral architecture for colonial occupation had been set, and all features of colonial improvement could be concentrated on the clearly bounded space of an island. The utopian vision of the South Seas grew apace after Defoe, and the attraction of the Pacific Island in particular has been surprisingly persistent. The Pacific Island, under the influence of a string of eighteenth century utopias, the paintings of Gauguin, the anthropology of Margaret Mead and twentieth-century popular culture, became the archetypal utopian space, not only for its idyllic mythology and nicely circumscribed geography but also because, whether painter, anthropologist, traveller or coloniser it offered a social *tabula rasa*.

BILL ASHCROFT

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Ever since Thomas More's *Utopia* islands have been primary sites for utopias, and the perfect location for the demonstration of the benefits of colonisation. From Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* in 1719 the moral architecture for colonial occupation had been set, and all features of colonial improvement could be concentrated on the clearly bounded space of an island. The utopian vision of the South Seas grew apace after Defoe, and the attraction of the Pacific Island in particular has been surprisingly persistent. The Pacific Island, under the influence of a string of eighteenth century utopias, the paintings of Gauguin, the anthropology of Margaret Mead and twentieth-century popular culture, became the archetypal utopian space, not only for its idyllic mythology and nicely circumscribed geography but also because, whether painter, anthropologist, traveller or coloniser it offered a social *tabula rasa*. The beauty of an island is its very clear boundaries, its presentation of a space in which the colonial project might proceed in a comprehensive way.

One novel that offers a virtual template for the power of modern ingenuity to turn a conveniently unpopulated Pacific island paradise into a colonial utopia, is Jules Verne's *The Mysterious Island* (*L'Île mystérieuse*) published in 1874. The novel's castaways proceed to dominate the space and time of the island in a copybook unfolding of the primary technologies of colonial transformation. But one particularly significant aspect of Verne's fantasy is its demonstration of the function of the species boundary in colonial domination. The blurred boundary between human and animal undermines the ostensibly enlightened Darwinian purpose of the author with a startling confirmation of racial hierarchy.

The novel depicts the adventures of five men: an Engineer, Cyrus Smith the captain; a reporter, Spilett; a sailor, Pencroff; a young botanist, Herbert and Nab a black servant.¹ These men, captured by rebel forces during the American Civil War and imprisoned at Richmond, Virginia, commandeer a balloon under the cover of a hurricane, which takes them seven thousand miles across America and half the Pacific Ocean to a deserted island where they crash after ejecting everything in the basket. This extremely unlikely journey prepares us for the equally unlikely island on which, due to the providential availability of everything — animal vegetable and mineral — exploitable by scientific ingenuity, the men establish a bountiful colony.

The plot of the novel is as improbable as the island itself. Having established a colony and having avoided crisis after crisis through the mysterious intervention

of an unknown protector on the island, castaways discover a note in a bottle indicating the existence of another castaway on nearby Tabor island. The note had been left twelve years earlier by a Lord Glenarven with the promise to return one day. Beating off a pirate ship manned by escaped convicts from Norfolk island the intrepid colonists eventually discover that their protector has all along been captain Nemo (from *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*), whose *Nautilus* is trapped in a cavern under the island. The dying Nemo explains that the island is about to explode and asking them to scuttle the *Nautilus* he gives them a chest of treasure worth millions. As the island explodes Lord Glenarven returns just in time to take them off the island and with the treasure they purchase a large tract of land in Iowa on which they can relocate their colonial enterprise.

The astonishing abundance of the island suggests that rather than any attempt at verisimilitude, much less a repetition of Crusoe's painstaking transformation, the novel is concerned to produce a morality tale of the limitless benefits of science and modern ingenuity. To this end Verne makes no attempt to invent the kind of island that might actually lie in the middle of the Pacific. This island snows in winter (because the Southern Hemisphere, according to Verne, is colder than the Northern!); its animals include kangaroos, koalas, echidnas, jaguars, tigers, foxes, rabbits, which are hunted, and sheep, goats, peccaries, onagers (a form of mule), which are domesticated. The fortuitous discovery of a grain of corn leads to an abundant harvest and the supply of edible plants on the island appears endless. But it is minerals that provide the key to the benefits of science. The discovery of coal and iron ore, conveniently near the surface, allows the production of everything from steel to glass to nitroglycerine. Cyrus Smith, true to his calling as engineer, supervises the construction of a blast furnace, roads, carts, bridges and hydraulic lifts. No invention is beyond him and no labour too difficult for the castaways.

Smith, the indomitable engineer who leads the group, is the embodiment of colonial determination and scientific modernity. As Verne demonstrates at great length, scientific knowledge, manufacturing expertise and engineering ingenuity are the key to dominance over the elements. Smith's calm determination, resourcefulness, dependability and wisdom mark him out as a type of imperial superman. The civilisation of the island is an exercise in problem solving rather than sustained and difficult effort. Where Defoe, in *Robinson Crusoe*, insists upon the length of time and the degree of physical labour in Crusoe's slow transformation of the island, such things as time and fatigue are ignored in *The Mysterious Island*. Labour is accomplished in the course of a sentence. Verne dismisses time and effort, dismisses the lengthy, arduous work required to bring these transformations to pass. The colonising process moves from problem to problem rather than from effort to effort. Consequently the castaways are not content with mere survival but engage in activities that present a virtual template for the colonial enterprise — surveillance, mapping, naming, hunting, cultivation and husbandry, manufacture, building and civilising. Their intention is to make

a ‘little America’ of the island, Pencroff asking only that: ‘we do not consider ourselves castaways, but colonists, who have come here to settle’ (54).

SPECIESISM, RACE AND IMPERIAL DOMINANCE

Scientific colonisation requires a race of noble and intrepid practitioners who can fulfil the moral requirements of imperialism. So the narrative of colonisation is not only the triumph of science but of a race of men. Curiously, Jules Verne, French novelist, salutes the Anglo-Saxon masculinity of these American settlers.

the settlers were men in the complete and higher sense of the word... It would have been difficult to unite five men, better fitted to struggle against fate, more certain to triumph over it. (63)

They are energetic (95) but the key to this narrative of colonial transformation is not energy but vision, the capacity to see beyond, to produce a monument to human ingenuity.

So is man’s heart. The desire to perform a work which will endure, which will survive him, is the origin of his superiority over all other living creatures here below. It is this which has established his dominion, and this it is which justifies it, over all the world. (311)

The issue of dominion signals a key feature of the novel, one that has not attracted much comment, but important because it announces that the challenge is not only one of science, modernity, and ingenuity, but the triumph of a species of human being who deserve to inherit the world. The moral problem of establishing a utopia on someone else’s land does not arise because the island is unpopulated, a necessary precursor to the narrative of science’s triumph over nature. But despite the absence of natives, the issue of race cannot be avoided because conquest must involve the exertion of power. Consequently the absence of natives is compensated in the novel by curiously contradictory speciesism.

The ‘civilizing’ mission can be linked to the assumption that ‘barbaric’ languages have placed other men at the level of animals, placing them in need of cultural redemption. It remains a given that animals are irredeemable, they remain the ultimate binary — non-human. Consequently speciesism and racism are not merely analogous, but one preceded and justified the other. We afflict other races because we first afflicted animals. As Carey Wolfe puts it,

Our humanist concept of subjectivity is inseparable from the discourse and institution of speciesism since the ‘human’ is *by definition* the *not* animal or ‘animalistic.’ This in turn makes possible a symbolic economy in which we can engage in ‘a non-criminal putting to death,’ as Derrida phrases it, not only of animals, but of other humans as well by marking them as animals. (40)

This conflation of racial ‘barbarism’ with inhuman animalism appears from the beginning of racialist thinking (and the word ‘barbarous’ still has the synonym ‘inhuman’ in Roget’s Thesaurus).

On the face of it Verne appears to be contesting the speciesist habit of abjecting animals. He was an enthusiastic supporter of Darwin but his apparent attempt in *The Mysterious Island* to give humanoid characteristics to an ape is radically subverted by the racialist hierarchy of the text. When the colonists regain their cave from a group of invading monkeys they capture an orangutan, and the description and subsequent improbable training of the animal demonstrate how the ape, in the absence of native inhabitants, works as a signifier of the link between ‘animal,’ ‘native,’ ‘barbarian,’ ‘primitive’.

The settlers then approached the ape and gazed at it attentively. He belonged to the family of anthropoid apes, of which the facial angle is not much inferior to that of the Australians and Hottentots. It was an orangoutang, and as such, had neither the ferocity of the gorilla, nor the stupidity of the baboon. It is to this family of the anthropoid apes that so many characteristics belong which prove them to be possessed of an almost human intelligence. Employed in houses, they can wait at table, sweep rooms, brush clothes, clean boots, handle a knife, fork, and spoon properly, and even drink wine... doing everything as well as the best servant that ever walked upon two legs. Buffon possessed one of these apes, who served him for a long time as a faithful and zealous servant. (148)

What, we might ask, is the function of this species slippage in the novel? What purpose is served by the comparison of the orangutan with ‘the Australians and Hottentots’? Does it suggest the humanoid characteristics of the ape, as Verne’s Darwinist beliefs might suggest, or the level of primitive humanity with which the colonial project must contend? In Roland Barthes’ discussion of the structural codes of the novel, ‘Where to Begin’ he suggests that like *Robinson Crusoe* ‘the myth of the desert island is based on a very real problem: how to cultivate without slaves? (85) Certainly the ape, named Jupiter or Jup is quickly taught how to be an unpaid servant, a position he adopts with alacrity and devotion. The Civil War back-story has banished any question of slavery from the island, but Jup seems to answer Barthes’ question. If Verne is offering a contemporary ‘scientific’ view of the affinity of apes and humans, the signifying function of the orangutan as racial subject countermands this. He signifies dependency and subservience and thus the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon settlers. The subjects who occupy the lowest orders of the party: the Negro servant Nab and the dog Top and the ape Jup share in their three letter names a sign of their marginal status and indeterminate species identity. While the novel’s treatment of Jup appears to be striving for a more scientifically enlightened view of apes, the racism of the representation is signified in the very blurriness of the species of the servants.

Barthes’ question: how to cultivate without slaves, suggests one motive for cultivating savages. Crusoe attempts to transform Friday, who is like a child into a white, civilized ‘adult’. Montgomery, in Wells’ *The Island of Doctor Moreau* attempts to transform the Beast People into docile Fridays. In *The Mysterious Island* the issue of servility blurs the species boundary considerably. The following

passage is worth quoting in full, so bizarrely does it traverse the animal / savage / primitive / slave categories.

By this time the intelligent Jup was raised to the duty of valet. He had been dressed in a jacket, white linen breeches, and an apron, the pockets of which were his delight. The clever orang had been marvelously trained by Nab, and any one would have said that the Negro and the ape understood each other when they talked together. Jup had besides a real affection for Nab, and Nab returned it. When his services were not required, either for carrying wood or for climbing to the top of some tree, Jup passed the greatest part of his time in the kitchen, where he endeavored to imitate Nab in all that he saw him do. The black showed the greatest patience and even extreme zeal in instructing his pupil, and the pupil exhibited remarkable intelligence in profiting by the lessons he received from his master.

Judge then of the pleasure Master Jup gave to the inhabitants of Granite House when, without their having had any idea of it, he appeared one day, napkin on his arm, ready to wait at table. Quick, attentive, he acquitted himself perfectly, changing the plates, bringing dishes, pouring out water, all with a gravity which gave intense amusement to the settlers, and which enraptured Pencroff.

‘Jup, some soup!’

‘Jup, a little agouti!’

‘Jup, a plate!’

‘Jup! Good Jup! Honest Jup!’

Nothing was heard but that, and Jup without ever being disconcerted, replied to every one, watched for everything, and he shook his head in a knowing way when Pencroff, referring to his joke of the first day, said to him,—

‘Decidedly, Jup, your wages must be doubled.’ (156)

Why would Verne risk the absurdity of an ape valet in white linen breeches, if not to confirm the fact that the ape is as much the subject of cultivation as the island? Pencroff refers to Jup as a ‘blackamoor’ the first time he sees him, and the description above inscribes Jup into a widespread nineteenth-century typology that interpreted racial features (or supposed features) as signs of ‘inferior’ races’ anatomical proximity to the great apes. The racial significance of the ape is cemented by the affinity between the ex-slave and the orangutan: they ‘understood each other when they talked together’. This is almost too neat a demonstration of the function of speciesism in racial marginalisation, and the quip about wages only emphasises his role as slave. Jup proves to be an indispensable servant, taking over, unasked, the role of waiter usually reserved for Smith’s Negro servant. He learns to carry messages and drive a cart, and when wounded after a fight with a marauding troop of colpeo foxes, Pencroff cries ‘We will nurse him as if he was one of ourselves’ (178).

The acculturation of the ape appears complete when he is discovered with Pencroff’s pipe, ‘smoking calmly and seriously, sitting crosslegged like a Turk at the entrance to Granite House!’ (179). The servant has been inducted into the *pantouflard* pleasures of the bourgeoisie. *Pantouflard* is Roland Barthes’

favourite negative adjective for bourgeois complacency. Derived from *la pantoufle*, the French for a carpet slipper, it signifies an ideology of domestic cosiness indicating the extent to which class confinement is mediated by the home and partly explaining the resilience of bourgeois mythologies (Knight 33). It is remarkable that Barthes misses this connection in his reading of the novel. Jup's induction into human society is a direct entry into the bourgeois comforts of the white middle class but, ironically, without diminishing his role as a slave. From this day Jup has a pipe of his own.

'Perhaps he is really a man,' said Pencroff sometimes to Nab. 'Should you be surprised to hear him beginning to speak to us some day?'

'My word, no,' replied Nab. 'What astonishes me is that he hasn't spoken to us before, for now he wants nothing but speech!' (179)

Jup's rapid civilising demonstrates the extreme racial ambiguity exposed by the project of colonisation. What may seem on the surface an attempt at re-thinking the status of the animal is in fact a confirmation of the racial hierarchy established by imperial rule. The novel is unable to negotiate the contradictions of the ape's position because the imperative of racial hierarchy in the colonising project is so strong.

But there is another way in which the novel compensates for the lack of primitive inhabitants on the island, and hence demonstrates the civilising benefits of colonisation. This also occupies the blurry no-man's land of the species boundary, and it comes in the form of a castaway on a nearby island who has reverted to a wild and primitive state. Ayrton, marooned for twelve years on Tabor island, is discovered by Spilett and Pencroff in an animal like condition. At first they think he is an ape, but discover that he is a man, 'fallen to the lowest degree of brutishness!'... it might justly be asked if there were yet a soul in this body, or if the brute instinct alone survived in it!... Hoarse sounds issued from his throat between his teeth, which were sharp as the teeth of a wild beast made to tear raw flesh (192). Ayrton signifies the ever-present danger of 'going native', the possibility that only a thin veneer of civilisation separates humanity from the animals. The moral implications of animality are attested by the fact that his descent to sub-human status has been triggered not only by extreme isolation but by an enormous sense of guilt at his criminal past, culminating in his intention to capture the ship that had eventually marooned him.

The 'man-beast' serves to demonstrate in concentrated form the civilising process designed to bring primitive beings into their full humanity. By feeding him, letting him develop at his own pace, allowing him to live in the corral to tend the animals and most importantly, by allotting him a role as labourer and servant, including him in the work of developing the island, Ayrton regains his humanity. The engineer 'observed him every moment! How he was on the watch for his soul' (199) and when he finally weeps, Smith exclaims, 'Ah, you have become a man again' (199).

Verne's apparent desire to redefine the humanoid characteristics of the ape cannot escape the boundaries of colonial discourse. The discourse that carries the group of castaways on a triumphant journey of scientific ingenuity and social improvement, organises itself relentlessly on the basis of a racial / species hierarchy that subverts any Darwinist intention of the author. When the island explodes and the group is rescued, the 'retrieved' man, Ayrton, escapes while the ape Jup is killed, victim not just of the volcano but of the one unsolvable problem of the novel: the problem of the species boundary, the problem of an ape in white breeches.

NOTES

- ¹ Although the Project Gutenberg version cited in this essay has different names (Harding for Smith; Pencroft for Pencroff and Neb rather than Nab) I will use the names in the original version. Page numbers refer to the Gutenberg Ebook.

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