TEXT
Journal of writing and writing courses

ISSN: 1327-9556 | https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/

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The Island of Brazil: a baroque travelogue

Abstract:
"The Island of Brazil" offers a critique of nationalist historical and spatial mythologies by drawing on the agility and flexibility of creativecritical methods. Operating at the intersection of fictocriticism, memoir and travel writing, the essay is both an extension of the author's previous writing on South America and a journey into the unknown. This entangled mixture is not [just] an aesthetic exercise; rather, the interwoven analysis, description and narration reflect the author's concern with transnational histories of colonisation – specifically, those analogous forms and metaphorical resonances which have otherwise been separated by modern, nationalist histories and their restricted vistas of representation. "The Island of Brazil" proposes an antithesis of Australian conquest by recalling a neglected lineage of Australian poetics – here represented by Patrick White's *Voss*, a novel that is emblematic of colonialist literature but, in its complexity, contradictions and expressionism, powerfully subverts many colonialist tropes. Like *Voss*, "The Island of Brazil" revives baroque, counter-modern strategies by constructing a series of *coincidentia oppositorum* (coincidence of opposites) and *discordia concors* (a combination of dissimilar images, or even the discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike). Accordingly, vast distances and times are collapsed or overlaid. After all, Australia once had its own Amazon: millions of years ago, nourished by frequent rain and great webs of rivers, a rainforest of similar size spread throughout the centre of the continent. As Australia dried out, however, rainfall over central Brazil increased, and what vanished in one place re-emerged somewhere else. The essay suggests, therefore, that what we might have assumed is unique to Australia is not so unique after all; going further, Australia, like Brazil, might not be anywhere at all. In these lands that are not ours, the sacred is immanent to matter and its obscure forces, but the divine lies only in the half-seen images of dream. The author's account, if not his entire subjectivity, must explode into myriad fragments, then, but in each fragment are labyrinths of biology, cryptography and geology; the crisis of sensory experience goes hand in hand with unending series of remarkable discoveries. Beings badly awakened from their flesh, travellers merge with fiction, and the fictions of the past; Voss sets out to find the Outback but loses himself in the Amazon.

Biographical note:
Stuart Cooke is a poet, essayist and translator. His books include the poetry collections *The grass is greener over your grave* (2023) and *Lyre* (2019), and a monograph, *Speaking the Earth's Languages: a theory for Australian-Chilean postcolonial poetics* (2013). He has also translated a wide variety of Latin American poets from Portuguese and Spanish. Stuart's recent creativecritical writing appears in *Barzakh* (USA) and *World Literature Today* (USA), and he was shortlisted for the 2024 Calibre Essay Prize. He is Associate Professor of Creative Writing and Literary Studies at Griffith University.

Keywords:
Amazon, outback, Brazil, Australia, *Voss*

The journey is a door through which one goes out of the known reality and steps into another, unexplored reality, resembling a dream.[1]

SALVADOR

1.
It was the last time I would walk this way, taking the back streets past towers of condominiums and fancy gymnasiums, past restaurants erupting from the guts of houses, while sweat trickled down my back. Occasionally, atop a hill or turning a corner, a gust of salty wind would ruffle my shirt, and in the distance I could see the blue fact of the ocean, the deep sweep of Baía or a strip of the Atlantic, nothing more than an afterthought beside the clamour of the Brazilian universe.

2.
What would you do in a country that was the mirror image of your own?

3.
Meaning: when you travelled inland, would you stumble upon the tails of your secrets?

Then, would they escape into ceaseless green onrushing?

4.
I'd come here to learn how to read the other half of Latin America: illimitable Brazil, roughly half of the continent and cupped by a semi-circle of Spanish. After a few weeks in language classes I felt like I could more or less get by.

But my real interest was in antimatter: I was looking for Australia's antithesis. Because Australia's exploration had led straight to the Dead Heart, traces of which were still ringing in white heads. Seeing nothing, we had journeyed underground, where we found fragments of an alien language: fossils of an enormous, desiccated rainforest. It was the lustre of my continent after the water had been baked away, the inevitable disappointment that settled over the landscape like a thin, oily veil.

But exploration into the other could reveal the opposite: Australia as it was; Australia as it was not.

[1] Guy de Maupassant in Lindqvist, S. (2012). *Saharan Journey*, J. Tate (Trans.). Granta Books, p. 124

5.
As I travel, I run ahead of my self and its need for punishment.

6.
In the most obvious, spatial terms, Australia and Brazil are among the world's largest nations, and at the heart of each are tremendous expanses of very thinly inhabited, inland "wilderness".

But Australian and Brazilian colonial histories begin from intriguingly antithetical positions: the Portuguese thought they had discovered an island, whereas Europeans long believed that Australia would be a continent as massive as Asia. After European discovery, then, Australia would shrink dramatically, whereas the Portuguese could have had no idea of just how much their little island would grow.

At any rate, that respective contraction and expansion reached an equilibrium, with two territories of roughly similar size. Indeed, Australian and Brazilian histories are both marked by a European anxiety to do with the sheer magnitude of the *space*. Hundreds of years on, the results converge: while Brazil's population is of course far larger than Australia's, and while its inland cities are larger and more numerous, in both countries the great majority of people live close to the south-eastern coasts. Emptiness remains in the heart; we do our best to ignore it.

Really, says my language teacher, Brazil is a continent in itself.

7.
But where Australia is hardened in the crisp light and dry air, there's something dispersive in Brazil's hugeness, something that makes it hard to focus on.

8.

> "… a resistance to analogy, what Locke was to call 'the fanciful discovery of metaphysic relations', was one of the first moves in the chess game of the modern, and the fear of metaphor was its first great symptom."[2]

9.
No, not some kind of dull, regulation travel narrative, describing people's clothes, the colours of their homes. As if the simple act of description could induce a fantasy…

[2] Parker, B. (1998). *The Triumph of Augustan Poetics: English literary culture from Butler to Johnson*. Cambridge University Press, p. 21

The alternatives, however, are confusing: do I turn inwards, does the story thereby become one of failure, of the distance between my self and the world? Or is the failure part of something else – the way in which I am called to places, and the ways in which they might take me in or push me away? I would be an expression of the world – no, not its lone voice, but *an* expression, a manifestation of its flows, an apparition of its processes.

What of the written work, then? A kind of translation, the world unfurling another facet of itself, searching for relation selectively – ready to embrace with one hand, to repel with the other. "The secret harmony of disharmony: I don't want something already made but something still being tortuously made."[3]

10.

I will spend a day in Salvador's old town before I head south. Some of the finest examples of baroque architecture can be seen in Salvador's churches, and it is towards the baroque that I feel I am drifting. Or, less haplessly, it is in the baroque that I think I will find solutions, both for a new nationalism, and for my self.

Back a little from the main square and the bustle and the coconut vendors and the men spinning up whirlwinds of capoeira, the São Francisco Church and Convent is a grand baroque repository. What strikes you is the exuberance of the interior decoration: all surfaces are covered in gold-sculpted woodwork and ornate oil paintings. As if art could spring from any surface.

I stand at the back, behind the last pew, and lose myself in a daze.

11.

> "… in the New World, the implanted Spanish baroque was appropriated and transformed: the churches were built by indigenous labour, from local materials, and crafted by indigenous and, later, mestizo artisans, who surreptitiously introduced elements and ornaments from their own cultures into the official Catholic iconography."[4]

12.

Looking across the horizontal ripples of the pews, your vision is gathered toward the centre by the repetition of vertical lines. In this sense there is an order, but it's only momentary. The longer you look, the more it unravels: the order bursts with spheres, spirals, painted bodies, arches and loads of lustrous gold – all of it so that Christ's body can explode with shining, golden daggers. And what might have been ordered by one glance is immediately overcome by another, there's nowhere to rest the eyes, they land on surfaces then slide across them, or

[3] Lispector, C. (2012). *Água Viva*. S. Tobler (Trans.). New Directions, p. 6
[4] Kaup, M. (2006). Neobaroque: Latin America's alternative modernity. *Comparative Literature* 58(2), p. 139

they flow onwards over layers, staircases of corners, tips, joins, or they're led into a spiral and suddenly you've been spat out. Form engages with chaos, embraces it, even personifies it, but never tames it. Chaos bubbles under surfaces, erodes edges.

Outside São Francisco I see nothing that resembles its interior, or nothing is revealed.

13.

Across the hill from the church, I find myself in the middle of Lago Pelourinho (what is a lake in Spanish hardens into a plaza in Portuguese). Inclining with the descent of the hill, it's surrounded by all manner of attractions.

At the top sits a museum for Jorge Amado, that great storytelling machine.

Further down the hill is the church of Rosario dos Pretos. Inside, the lines are clearer than in São Francisco, but even here you lose things. Clean, white surfaces are punctured with elaborate, luminous pockets.

Back up the hill, closer to Amado's museum, Michael Jackson stands two stories tall. Next to him, there's a shop selling all kinds of counterfeit merchandise, and two huge speakers are placed out the front. All day long, Jackson staples pump across the plaza. The Brazilian version of the "They Don't Care About Us" film clip was shot here; the song's on especially high rotation. All day long, that thundering, military beat. It's the high synth of the second verse that collides with a drumming troupe gathered in front of Amado's museum. Suddenly, life is imitating art: the drummers of the plaza begin to drown out the song, just as the drummers of Salvador colonised a portion of the film clip.

PORTO SEGURO

1.
I have arrived in Botany Bay, but it is not called Botany Bay. I can see a name beneath the skins of things, where it wobbles in their liquid interiors. I sneak up while it is sleeping; in its deep, slow breaths I can see the soft flesh of the place expand between the scales of its hard, spiky armour. My knife would slide in as easily as a needle. Instead, I carefully pare off one of its scales and, with vine hanging from a nearby tree, I tie it to my neck.

2.
I have flown one hour south to Porto Seguro, safe port, first city of Brazil. After a restless night, I set out for the *cidade alta* in the sweaty heat of late morning, walking between the ocean and a pale grey highway.

3.
Originally a traditional Portuguese city of two distinct levels, Porto Seguro was divided into the low and the high. The low city survived with fishing and timber industries until the 1970s; now it seems to be devoted entirely to tourism and school excursions. To get to the high city, I walk through the sprawl of the low until I see a small path leading up the side of a hill.

Near the top, I come across four large cannons perched on the hillside, one semi-buried in dirt, the other three scattered like pick-up sticks. I can see everything from here, I imagine that I can almost see Africa.

Further on I come to a plateau, the site of the high city. Implicit in the city's ostentatious position was that great European neurosis (guilt) about dangers from the sea. "Here", says an information sign beside the path, "begins the story of the Brazilian people, the result of a meeting between Indians, whites and blacks."

Founded in 1535, Porto Seguro's *cidade alta* was the first centre of Portuguese power in the New World. Now it's like a toy town, an abstraction, little more than an idea, atop the "real" city below. I walk along a main street lined with squat, fruit-coloured homes before the episode peters out in a large clearing, which is surrounded by preserved chapels and bigger buildings. Wide open, sun-scorched. In peoples' gardens, crosses are staked in the earth like stunted Hills Hoists.

Another strip of Atlantic to one side.

4.

I stumble into a museum adjacent to a chapel, and for a moment I'm enveloped in darkness. Gradually objects reveal themselves.

Once upon a time, Brazil flourished with hundreds of different languages, over 200 of which are still spoken today. When the Portuguese first landed, they set foot on the coast of Tupi-Guarani country, now known as southern Bahia. Guarani pueblos continued south all the way down towards São Paulo, while the Tupi extended north.

What is Bahia was Tupiniquim and Tupinambá. There was also Tapuia, pushed inland by all those Tupi, Aymoré and Guerem. These were nations of villages, where the huts of a few thousand people were distributed around a central plaza or courtyard. They farmed manioc and corn, interweaving their agriculture with hunting and gathering.

Says a plaque in the museum atop the high city: one hundred years after the first Portuguese landing, all these people were extinct. Although their traces are spread all over the world: shipped out by travellers, missionaries and soldiers, thousands upon thousands of Tupi and Guarani cultural products can be found in most of the museums of Europe.

5.

In the heat, with streams of tourists sipping from delicious, cool coconuts, with the tourist shops flaming in bright pink/green/yellow bags, towels and sarongs, with the Atlantic slapped to one side, its unbroken blue barely a shade darker than the sky, the eyes scan to the north, to the south, to beach town after beach town, beach after beach lined with palms, scattered with men wheeling ice-cream carts, coconut carts… who could possibly imagine the beginning of this place? This mammoth, rambling, unfathomable place, of which our planet knows few larger?

6.

I discover another room in the museum, which seems to contradict the information provided in the others. After 500 years since the first contact with Europeans, it says here, many Indigenous pueblos remain. Those 200 languages (and most likely there are many more still to be documented, mainly from Amazonia) are spread across more than 240 pueblos. Their numbers, a display tells me, are between 350 to 750 thousand people. But this is a country of close to 210 *million*, a country whose origins lie partly in an imperative to procreate with Indigenous pueblos, lest it perish and fall prey to another empire. So as I look at that number I can't help but wonder at what it hides.

Returning to the glare outside, I find myself thinking again of a polemical opinion piece from *The Australian* that I read while in the waiting room at the airport. Most Australian literature, it argued, labours under a Protestant predisposition "towards reticence and understatement". Any "openly expressionist" writing is regarded as excessive… or naïve… or ill-mannered… or, in the case of Patrick White, *too difficult*. So that the baroque, the baroque, what did it say

about the baroque… "with its emphasis on the uninhibited emotions, on theme and variation, repetition and elaboration, gesture and performance, appears to have hardly any legitimacy at all, so little is it spoken of."[5]

7.

> "The sexual enthusiasms might have been spontaneous but at every point they were encouraged by the Portuguese authorities. Little underpeopled Portugal had to occupy coastal Brazil at almost any cost and start drawing on whatever riches its interior had. It had to populate Brazil or perish, and the Portuguese men threw themselves into the task with a will. They killed or enslaved the men and slept with the women and informal polygamy was the norm. Against natural inclination and the connivance of the secular powers, the church never had a chance."[6]

8.

Trying to pick up a girl in a bar:

What next for your travels? she asks, Where will you go after Porto Seguro?

I want to go further south, to Caraíva. I really want to see Monte Pascoal, and there's an Indigenous village there, the first to have contact with the Portuguese.

Oh, she laughs, but they aren't real Indigenous people, they're only theatre. They just sell their crafts then go home to sleep in the cities. The only *real* Indigenous people left in Brazil are in the Amazon.

But what's a "real" Indigenous person? They don't have to confirm to our 500-year-old stereotypes.

Yes of course. But in Brazil they lie, they get everything. Education. Land. Housing.

You sound really racist! Like so many white Latinos I've met.

You sound like every white tourist who comes to Brazil!

9.

I am rootless, hopeless, bound by the rhyme of the suffix. My silly ideas. What am I doing here? I worry about little things. I don't like my room. And the next one, will it be any good? And will my luggage get lost? Will I struggle? Will you follow?

[5] Indyk, I. (2012). Give Baroque Writing a Break. *The Australian*. October 27, 2012.
[6] Robb, P. (2004). *A Death in Brazil: a book of omissions*. Duffy & Snellgrove, pp. 144–145

10.

But just as Botany Bay lies to the south of Circular Quay, everything begins a little further south of Porto Seguro, too…

11.

"… and the [Australian], walking into the sunset, was burnt up."[7]

[7] White, P. (1968). *Voss*. Pyramid, pp. 72–73

CARAÍVA

1.

The next day's different. A long bus trip through low-lying scrub and dry, tropical bush, the sandy earth a pinkish-yellow. Reminiscent of the Kimberley in places, in others of tropical Queensland. Occasionally things open onto pasture, which is bounded in the distance by rolling, low-lying hills.

I feel like I'm moving closer to the source, where I will achieve a permanent state of revelation.

2.

> "Who were they, from what land, what were they looking for,
> What part of the ocean had they crossed?
> …
> We Portuguese are of the Occident,
> We are looking for the lands of the Orient …"[8]

3.

The year is 1499.

Portugal's population is little more than one million. It is one of the smallest and poorest countries in Europe, but it's busily preparing to set up string of fortified trading stations in Africa and India.

The story goes like this (and indeed, many scholars think that it is little more than a story):

> thirteen ships set out for Africa
> after passing the Cape Verde Islands, one of the fleet disappears during the night
> during the search, the remaining ships lose their bearings
> after six weeks at sea,
> and four weeks since passing the Cape Verde Islands,
> the sailors see great quantities of drifting seaweed
> the next morning, shearwaters are flying over their ships
> that evening they catch sight of land.

4.

To draw a line. To watch it slide through two different countries. Or: to wander into two countries and find the same line.

[8] From Luíz Vaz de Camões, *Os Lusíadas*, Canto 1.50 (my trans.).

To discover after the age of discovery: not new lands, but the hidden connections between them.

To part the vines and fronds and to find: a wormhole.

To fuse one place to another, or to discover how they might already be fused.

5.

At any other time of year, Caraíva would be a sleepy hamlet nestled between a river mouth and the ocean. But I've arrived during the summer break, so it's packed. Set low behind the sand-dunes, it festers in the heat.

In my stifling little room, I try to keep the bigger picture in mind. According to the map, Monte Pascoal, the object of my journey, lies further to the south and a little inland. Near the Monte, Potoxi is a Tupi village whose inhabitants are descendants of the first people to make contact with the Portuguese. If I am going to begin to know anything about Brazil, I reason with a typically powerful refusal to interrogate my logic, then surely I will need to start there.

But when I walk to the beach, I can see nothing up or down the coast. No great mountain. No sign of a distant settlement. When I ask people how I might get there, no one seems to be certain. You'd need a car, they say, definitely a guide.

Although I've travelled so far, I could be further from the source than when I began.

6.

I go hunting for a guide. Try the village square, I'm told. In the middle of a dirt plaza, some old men are seated under a slumped tree. They tell me to come back the next day.

I come back the next day and no one is there.

7.

When the Portuguese first saw it, Brazil was an island. The cartographic limitations of the era indicated that the land was part of an extended archipelago that led on to the Spice Islands of the Pacific, and then the East Indies.

On May 1, 1500, Pero Vaz de Caminha, a fidalgo in the Portuguese navy, was the first to describe the island of Brazil in a famous letter to the King of Portugal, Manuel I. According to Vaz de Caminha, the first piece of land that they saw was Monte Pascoal, ("Easter Mountain"). Easter fell in early May in 1500, which goes some way to explaining the nomenclature. But in that mountain the Portuguese also saw a sign of their salvation:

> On this very day, in the last hours of light, we have seen land! Primarily a large mountain, very high and round, and other, lower ranges to its south; and a ground covered with forests; to the mountain the captain gave the name Monte Pascoal and to the land Vera Cruz![9]

They named what they saw "The Island of the True Cross", and Vaz de Caminha's letter became the first written account of Brazil. Given the exultant tone, some consider it to be the nation's primordial poem, too. Pero Voss de Caminha…

8.

Caraíva is no sleepy village. I am uneasy here. The streets are rivers of deep, hot sand. I'm in no cabaña by the sea, something with a lawn out front, trees, shade. My room is right next to a diesel generator, which roars for hours on end when the village's power gets cut off. I step outside into the cramped courtyard of someone's back yard. Everything's clumped together, and explodes onto the beach, which is lined with pousadas and bars and hundreds of deck chairs. There's no shade, unless you want to pay for it under an umbrella, and nowhere to sit and watch the world go by apart from the restaurants and bars. There's nowhere to wander quietly, either, to stop occasionally in order to jot down the lines of a poem. It's a space that resists contemplation, that waits at the edges, ready to nudge you back into the fray.

It's as if everything's conspiring to keep me locked in my room. But out of town, up and down the coast, there's only a sprinkling of lights; otherwise, the full moon shows miles and miles of sand bordered by black bush. So that, as I feel myself wanting to expand, I cannot. I'm hemmed in by a densely packed settlement, where the only way to extricate myself is to return to the white, windowless walls of my room.

Every night, a live band plays on the beach until the early morning, with strobe lights shooting across the sky.

9.

While in my room I can hear the owners of the pousada shuffling about outside. They are probably wondering what I'm up to. Why would someone come here on his own? Doesn't he have a family? What's wrong with him?

I try to tell myself that this is OK, that this is like a writing retreat, but the days lie before me like rivers of sizzling sand. So much space and time; what will I do?

[9] Many copies of the letter, in both Portuguese and English translation, can be found online.

10.

> "And in immense separation one desires to recover control of the distant, to include it, contain it, possess it. Solitude is the seed of imperial desire."[10]

11.

The best way to get to Potoxi would be along the beach, one of the pousada owners tells me, not on the road through the scrub. I set off after breakfast. The coast seems to stretch on and on forever, on through the memories of childhood holidays on another continent. I could walk my whole life in either direction and I would remain on the edge of this unimaginable country.

The burning white sand, the howling wind… after an hour or so my senses have exhausted themselves and gone into hibernation. I am walking along a beach in northern New South Wales. I am on the edge of Tasmania. I am on the edge of my life.

Out of nowhere a boy appears, as if from the spirit world. He's coming towards me. I slow to ask him for directions, but he's too absorbed in his phone to notice, and his headphones block out my call.

Miles and miles of beach, all of it lined by a low, forested rise.

A while later I see a man sitting on a bench under the shade of some coconut palms. There's a small hut behind him, but otherwise he could have grown up from the flat, green ground. The village is another two kilometres down the beach, he says. He climbs one of the palms and hacks a coconut off for me. I drink and drink and pay him, then keep going.

Another hour passes; clearly I've missed the village by now. I see a small rise in the distance, which seems to be covered with vegetation. A hill of some kind? Could it be Monte Pascoal? Have I missed the village and instead gone straight to the beginning?

But as I approach, the mountain begins to shrink, as if evaporating into the white-hot air, and when I'm close enough to see the shapes of the vegetation it has withered into little more than a subtle rise. I have been walking for hours; Caraíva is a tiny speck in the distance. I turn back.

12.

If I am spurned from one country, how am I spurned? Why should I then turn to this one? And, finally, if Brazil leaks, like some kind of amorphous excess, into Australia, what would that prove? The endless syncretism of the empire's panopticon?

Or, perhaps, I'd see you in a new light. Not to continually rediscover you (as if it were hidden), à la the nationalist novels of the 20th century, but to realign my relationship to your materials,

[10] Yépez, H. (2013). *The Empire of Neomemory*. J. Hofer, C. Nagler, & B. Whitener (Trans.). ChainLinks, p. 74

experience the unsettlement of new combinations. And is this not the objective of all art? To propose new relations across space, to intensify them, make them liveable?

13.

> "The error has consisted in our taking things as if they were part of the same *universe*."[11]

14.

When I get back to the pousada I am exhausted, and burnt, and my eyes are vibrating. But the owner tells me that she has contacted a Pataxó friend who runs tours to the village and Monte Pascoal.

15.

> "To make yourself, it is also necessary to destroy yourself."[12]

16.

In a small, two-seater buggy, my guide Daniel and I set off along the beach, along exactly the same route that I walked two days earlier.

After a short while – my day-long ordeal by foot squashed to about 20 minutes – we turn inland over the dunes and pass that shrinking hill I'd seen. It's not a hill or a rise at all, but a stand of taller trees, apparently impenetrable. My first expedition, like some flimsy, poorly made trinket, has quickly disintegrated.

Soon after, we arrive at a small cluster of huts beside an inlet. Daniel takes me to one, where I pay to hire a canoe. We cross the inlet, get out and walk across more dunes, while the river sweeps through mangroves and past another cluster of huts, all wooden boards and corrugated iron.

We walk down a dirt road. Don't think about the heat.

Finally we arrive at a market of some kind, with stalls selling Índio crafts, music, beach towels. Then there's a row of restaurants by the sea. Daniel starts to tell me about each one, do I want to get a drink? I guess so.

I sit down at a table and he disappears. I am motionless with a lime lemonade, sweating under a shitty shade cloth, in front of a solidified, turquoise sea. I drink slowly, wondering if this is it, if the "tour" was to take me here. Nothing happens.

[11] Yépez, *The Empire of Neomemory*, p. 99
[12] White, *Voss*, p. 36

Eventually I pay and go looking for him. He's sitting with some people at another restaurant nearby. You don't want to eat anything? No. So he sends me off to look at a sandbar at the tip of the point. I trudge off, despondent. More coast. A blister on my heel.

When I'm done with the point I'm ready to go, so we wander back to the canoe.

On the way we pick up Pedro, a young traveller from Minais Gerais with long, black hair and no fixed destination. His happiness at having scored a lift is so discordant that I have to look away as we talk.

It's only when we're back in the buggy and returning to Caraíva that Daniel suddenly turns off the beach.

We're in Barra Velha ("Old Town"), he announces, the Pataxô village. It's the oldest town in Brazil, he says, sweeping his hand over the scrub.

Two thousand people are meant to live here, but they are dispersed among scatters of shambolic, half-finished homes and old cottages painted in pastel colours. Daniel races through, without stopping. There's a large undercover area in the middle of town, potted roads and unfinished walls.

Then we've shot out the other side of town, back onto the road toward the beach, flying over flats, low-lying scrub, salt pans, flood plains. Daniel points to our right, it's *there*, held by the distance, there, Monte Pascoal, far off towards the horizon, its hazy dome like a deformed egg, Easter Mountain, unmissable.

Hurtling out onto the beach, I look back one last time to see what the first Portuguese saw. It's not Australia's continuous, blue plateau, but rather a single rise – 1500 metres or so – like some sort of errant growth, darker and hazier than all the sun-kissed shrubs and salt-crystals around us. And in stark contrast to the pace of those approaching galleons, we are flying away in a cloud of exhaust.

17.

It was always like this:

1) The fleet of weary, sunburnt and irritable sailors anchors offshore. To whom can you call, across this bent, milky planet?
2) The next morning, in the weak, salty light, they make out seven or eight people on the beach.
3) By the time they get a landing boat ready, a group of twenty Tupi are waiting to greet them.

But explorers' accounts tell us little of what these sleek and naked locals might have been thinking, of how whole cosmologies might have been yanked open to account for this arrival of pale, bearded people in colourful, smelly skins.

18.

We stop and swim in a beautiful, coffee-brown river.

> It winds through mangroves and all the way to the Monte, Daniel says.

Pedro tells me about his travel plans.

19.

> "They were dark and quite naked, with nothing to cover their shame. They carried bows in their hands with their arrows. They all came boldly toward the boat, and Nicolo Coelho made a sign to them to lay down their bows, and they laid them down. He couldn't converse with them, or reach any useful understanding, because of the surf breaking on the shore."[13]

20.

To sit on the ground or tumble into it, knowing that nothing will be there – no ants' nest, no snakes or scorpions – because the earth is a benign thing compared to your force, your capacity, because spontaneity only brings opportunity.

21.

Do not underestimate the moment's significance. The sighting of land, the salvation of Easter Mountain, that landing on Tupi coastline – a full nineteen years before Hernán Cortés and his men landed in Mexico – it was a huge, epistemological anchor that would arrest Europe's slow, steady drift to the east and wrench it to a halt with such ferocity that the foundations of Western thought would shudder and crack.

A year and a half later, more Portuguese sailed into an enormous, splendid bay to the north and called it *Bahia de todos os santos* ("All Saints Bay"). Brazil had begun. A few decades later, Salvador would sprawl over the northern headland of Bahia de todos os santos like some enormous, contorted jewel. Salvador: site of my entry; site of perpetual return.

[13] Robb, *A Death in Brazil*, pp. 66–67

22.

In dreams I follow my map to the end. I fly towards you with my arms outstretched, and your X turns slowly until it aligns with my form. I'm immersed in its heavy whiteness, I am subsumed.

I reappear as a cluster of beamed notes rolling along a flat, gently undulating stave.

But when they leave my name on the land, irrevocably, my material body swallowed by its sign, it is on some desert place, a perfect abstraction, that will encourage no excess in posterity.[14]

[14] Paraphrasing White, *Voss*. p. 42

INLAND?

1.

If I turned away from Easter Mountain and its submerged egg, it was because I knew, having seen the beginning, that the only option was to keep going. And the only direction was to the west, inland, inside, where now, as I venture ever further into this landscape of innumerable animals and brazen, alien forms, the mind struggles to take hold.

2.

It goes like this:

1) A tiny European country discovers an enormous island. North and south, the coast bulges with forests.
2) They drop anchor and row a small boat to shore.
3) They see nothing.
4) They venture inwards.

3.

> "In the sixteenth century the Portuguese found nothing that could remotely compare with Peru, and, after setting up sugar plantations in a handful of enclaves along the Atlantic coast, they had nowhere to turn but towards the vast and mysterious interior. It was this *sertão* which offered a wide horizon of possibility to those Portuguese and half-castes who were unable to establish themselves adequately on the coast. The interior would always beckon, for it was full of Indians to enslave and there remained the promise of precious metals to be discovered."[15]

4.

> "It would seem to me, though, from such evidence as we have collected, which is inconsiderable, mark you, as the result of mere foraying expeditions from the fringes, so to speak, it seems that this country will prove most hostile to anything in the nature of planned development. It has been shown that deserts prefer to resist history and develop along their own lines. As I have remarked, we do not *know*. There may, in fact, be a veritable paradise adorning the interior. Nobody can say. But I am inclined to believe, Mr. Voss, that you will discover a few black-fellers, and a few flies, and something resembling the bottom of the sea."[16]

[15] Williamson, E. (2009). *The Penguin History of Latin America.* Penguin, p. 175
[16] White, *Voss*, p.62

5.

I am travelling inland from Salvador on a straight, sealed road. As we rise into the hinterland, the human population starts to thin; trees and greenery are gradually replaced by spiky succulents and thorny scrub, the cars by bicycles and mules. Salvador's salty grime evaporates from my skin, and soon my tongue is dry as sandpaper. Discrete forms are steadily eroded.

Landscapes of dried-out, rolling pasture. *In that flat country of secret colours…*[17]

6.

The interior of northeast Brazil is a long way from the images of lush, humid rainforest that dominate more stereotypical images of the country. Beyond the green, well-watered coast with its temperate sea breeze, beyond the middle hinterland with its good grazing country, the vegetation of the inland quickly gives way to seemingly eternal expanses of stony, drought-ravaged earth marked only by ranges of arid hills and bone-dry riverbeds.

The interior drylands take up over a million square kilometres, or three quarters of the territory of the northeast. While one in three Brazilians live in the northeast, nearly all are located in the lush littoral. Next to those of the coast, the people of the drylands are distinct in their appearance and their culture, their way of speaking and looking at the land.

The name for the drylands comes from old Portuguese. A *deserto* is a desert; a *desertão* is a big desert, which was how the dry, forbidding interior appeared to those who arrived from the sea. With time, the colonists dropped the prefix, and often they made the word plural, too: *sertões*, like certainties, the vast, arid interiors of even vaster continents.

7.

> "I have not [walked upon the bottom of the sea]. Except in dreams, of course. That is why I am fascinated by the prospect before me. Even if the future of great areas of sand is a purely metaphysical one."[18]

8.

Further south, they brought cattle with them. Stock routes were worn into the landscape and the interior was parcelled into huge cattle properties, some of which were bigger than entire European nations.

9.

> "Mining companies, pastoral companies
> Uranium companies

[17] White, *Voss*, p. 168
[18] White, *Voss*, p. 62

Collected companies
Got more right than people
Got more say than people"[19]

10.

"Like the name of Australia's *outback*, the *sertão* was freighted with the sense of a world elsewhere, beyond human settlement and like the *never never* in some ways beyond understanding. It was strange and bleak to the maritime people who settled Brazil and *clung to the coast like crabs*."[20]

11.

"Knowledge is never a matter of geography. Quite the reverse, it overflows all maps that exist. Perhaps true knowledge only comes of death by torture in the country of the mind."[21]

12.

About five hours inland from Salvador, the earth has dried into a West Kimberley orange. I think of an old poem of mine, *We sped / at one thirty along a dusty red road / gloved in burnt scrub…*[22] If only I could bring you here, if I could create a link between worlds… and then the Australian island might crack open and accept once again those thousands of fresh water tributaries…

I'm jolted from my reverie by a loud explosion under the bus. We've blown a tire. Soon we're pulling over. When the driver kills the engine and, with it, the air conditioning, everyone starts to clamber off. As I step down onto the gravel, heat hits me in the face as if I've opened an oven.

The mumbling of the other passengers is quickly dwarfed by the size of the cavern that we've all stumbled into, its monotonous blue lid, its wobbling horizon, and scrawls of greenness scrabbling over parched outcrops and out of sight. Even the flies, who land in the tiny creeks from our eyes, seem to drone quietly, as if they know all too well that sound in the sertão burns up as quickly as it travels.

We huddle in the ragged shade of a drooping acacia. The air whistles listlessly, with barely the energy to lift the brim of my hat.

[19] From 'The Dead Heart', by Midnight Oil, *Diesel and Dust* (1987).
[20] Robb, *A Death in Brazil*, p. 103
[21] White, *Voss*, p. 428
[22] Cooke, S. (2011). Out with Franz, *Edge Music*, Interactive Press, p. 70

In the distance, where the road turns around a verge, I see a tall, dark form slowly stalking across the escarpment. It could be a giant raven. *The trapped crow stalked out. Although rusty and crumpled, he had triumphed…*[23]

An ostrich? I ask an elderly couple beside me. But I don't understand their reply. Where are you from?

The sertão, the lady says, but her lips barely move. She points towards the horizon.

Could it be that the hot, dry air erodes Portuguese in the same way that it wears down the contours of English? In a land where any ostentation – a colourful blossom, an electric rhythm – has withered by mid-morning.

A younger man tells me that the dark, stalking form is a rhea. But from this distance I have no idea what that means.

It looks like an emu, an Australian bird, I say. But Australia, where is that?

From this distance, everything could be the same. In the landscape's optical democracy, all preference is made whimsical, and human, bird and stone become endowed with unguessed kinships.

A sign's nailed to a lonely red gum: *nature has no price, it is a gift from God*.

13.

> "They are baroque for how they tend to construct *coincidentia oppositorum* (coincidence of opposites) and *discordia concors*, or… 'a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike.'"[24]

14.

As I venture deeper, the land sheds the last of those features that would otherwise tell me where I am. Buildings, trees, people – all vertical things – disappear until soon I am left with only the minor undulations of an earth hardened against the vagaries of time. The terrain begins to shimmer and flicker, and it appears that somewhere else – somewhere equally unknown, yet strangely, equally, familiar – is being superimposed upon the land before me. I lose all pretence to clarity, to edges; the earth might be at the tips of my fingers or just beyond them, flies might be on my face or in my head. All I know is that the sun is nailed to the sky, and that everything else is yet to be fixed in place.

[23] White, *Voss*, p. 72

[24] Christopher D. Johnson, quoting Samuel Johnson, in Baroque Discourse. In Lyons (Ed.). (2019). *The Oxford Handbook of the Baroque*. Oxford University Press, p. 561

I travel through this boundless, formless universe until it is clear that I am no longer travelling across space, but that I am growing larger, and that space is collapsing beneath me.

15.

> "Suddenly I remember,
> with my fingernails I carve
> the tokonoma in the wall.
> I need a tiny hollow,
> there I can reduce myself
> to reappear anew,
> to touch myself and put my forehead in its place.
> A tiny hollow in the wall."[25]

16.

> "The function of poets is to create images of this spatialization-of-time; it is given to them to be the pantopians of the Oxident. It is given to poets to destroy time, to consolidate the notion of a total space."[26]

17.

We go through a tunnel and emerge once again amongst cacti and rock cliffs. A lone boy stands by the road. He shouts at the bus when we pass. There is sun on his shouting, and on his red hat.

18.

There is a cross in the desert, looming like a white crack in space. In the brilliance of the midday sun it seems to glow, to throb, to suck up heat and light and relieve the searing plains a little of their burden.

As I stare at the cross my eyes split into four quadrants; the top two mark out a blue field with a moon-shaped rock in one corner; the bottom two are awash with a mirage of ochre and sandstone, one of which starts to swirl into a burgundy mud, and to sprout with brilliant green shoots.

It is starting to grow, this glorious, green story. *The dead heart lives here*. I have crossed the hinterland, I have endured the heat and I have escaped the memory of my disappointment. Now, on the cusp of unimaginable wealth, I open my heart like a basket to gather as much as I can. I am drawn into my salvation by a vine slowly encircling my wrist. Soon, all the deaths of

[25] From 'El pabellón del vacío', José Lezama Lima (my trans.). In Echavarren et al. (Eds). (2010). *Medusario: muestra de poesía latinoamericana*. Mansalva, p. 29
[26] Yépez, *The Empire of Neomemory*, p. 145

the past will have been forgotten. When I emerge from the dry, crinkled cocoon of the sertão, I will stretch my limbs in green unfolding upon green.

19.

Millions of years ago, a rainforest of Amazonian size spread throughout the centre of the Australian continent, nourished by frequent rain and great webs of rivers. As the continent dried out, however, rainfall over central Brazil increased, and what vanished in one place re-emerged somewhere else. And this cycle continues, albeit in smaller, less drastic spirals: Central Australia can flood, and turn green; the Amazon can dry out, and burn. Laying one country over the other produces a kind of delayed correspondence, or a conceptual portal – at either ends of which are two completely different, and inextricable, worlds.

20.

While on the one hand it is a relief to leave the sertão, to see that it does not, in actual fact, go on and on into the never never, I also feel a little sad for its passing. Across that parched, rocky skin, thought flew freely and the mind – to paraphrase a master – was the least of my possessions. As I re-enter the green, I return to built forms and higher densities of human settlement. After the desert, there is no more desert: domesticated landscapes fill the bug-splattered bus windows, shocking me back into the quadratic realities of property. Everything I see is shadowed by spectres of comparison: neatly whitewashed ranch houses upon low, exposed hills, the empowering aesthetic of prospect enabled by the clear-cut. It's all reminiscent of colonial-era paintings of coffee-estates and then, like a deeper memory beneath the surface, long drives through the sugar cane and cattle country of New South Wales. This is an "aspirational landscape", a landscape that many Brazilians "would enthusiastically call *linda* and *limpa* and *bonitinha* … breathing deeply their relief from the claustrophobic indeterminacies of the forest gloom".[26]

Yet, "this must also be an ugly landscape, a despoiled landscape of the not-there—a landscape produced through an overdetermining narrative … massively cleared and charred, choked with thorny scrub and sprouting babassu palms, interrupted here and there by statuesque forest remnants, exuberant yellow-flowered *ipê* and full-crowned Brazil nut trees, pitiful memorials, living dead."[27] From the sertão, then, I arrive in some kind of limbo, and intermediate zone between desert and rainforest, where one landscape follows another into the furnace. To escape the highways and their tributaries of destruction, I realise that I need to go deeper. For what has been destroyed is the fantastical and, within it, the plants of my hallucinations. The river is the only way.

[27] Raffles, H. (2002). *In Amazonia: a natural history*. Princeton University Press, p. 153

21.

If the similarities seem too broad or speculative, and the stark differences more obvious or prominent, there are resonances even in these differences. For where European exploration into the heart of Brazil revealed the world's most fecund biological complex, in Australia they found the negative image instead: a semi-arid ecosystem. In each case, European eyes could barely comprehend what they saw: fecund, frivolous, mindless, promiscuous Nature, or the disappointing silence of the Dead Heart. In each case, the interior was interiorised; it became a source of national shame.

In Australia, the hope that the centre of the continent would reveal fertile soils and enormous lakes – as if the land should have been designed with the same blueprint as the United States – was quickly dashed as Europeans found, instead, some of the world's most unforgiving environments. Far from growing into a glorious twin of that new, northern nation, Australia would thereafter only be its smaller, malnourished cousin.

Australians might surmise, then, that in Brazil everything was different, for there in the interior was instead the world's largest riverine basin, replete with water, wood and all kinds of biota. But no. Infinite fecundity can be just as foreboding to the European psyche as unending aridity. By the early 20th century, Brazil was in the grips of positivism and, like Australia, social Darwinism. The positivists and social Darwinists were convinced that Brazil was doomed to underdevelopment because so many Brazilians were infected with inferior material: the blood of Indigenous Brazilians. Driven by Portugual's desperation to populate its new territories, "centuries of indiscriminate couplings had produced a people of bastard voluptuaries". There resulted, then, "a terrible tension between the expansiveness and optimism that were generated in even the tightest mind by Brazil's gorgeous climate, its vastness and beauty and abundance, and the nagging fear of being doomed to backwardness".[28] And nowhere was such Indigenous abundance in greater concentrations than in the Amazonian basin. Like Australians, most Brazilians took shelter in the east, looking desperately to Europe for their maps.

22.

The Amazon: antithesis of Order and Progress; source of the night from which Brazil must waken.

The Amazon: biological baroque; antithesis to Australia's deserts of reticence.

23.

> "If we do not come to grief on our mediocrity as a people. If we are not locked forever in our own bodies. Then, too, there is the possibility that our hates and our carnivorous habits will unite in a logical conclusion: we may destroy one another."[29]

[28] Robb, *A Death in Brazil*, p. 29
[29] White, *Voss*, p. 428

24.

The first Europeans to venture into Brazil's wet, mulching heart were the *bandeirantes* or slave runners, hardened mercenaries in search of natives to be rounded up and put to work on the sugar plantations. The expansion of the Brazilian map was driven by the need for manpower in the small settlements along the coast. "Such excursions into the wilderness served to extend the radius of Portuguese control deep into the hinterland of South America." As the bandeirantes penetrated further, "rudimentary settlements would spring up and the Brazilian frontier would move further towards the heart of the continent".[30] No Manifest Destiny, no Inland Sea; Brazil is the shape of slaving.

25.

A gigantic, watery plate slides through the land.

I don't know whose country this is, or what it's called. All I know is that wherever I step I am swept away. Beneath this low, overcast sky, in this dank, woollen air, nothing seems to hold. My skin can't hold my self and I leak through it. But, unable to merge with the river, my sweat congeals into a greasy carapace.

Down by the bank, there's a man casting a small net into the choc-chalky liquid. When I ask him about the people here, he tells me instead about the people I'll find up- or down-stream.

> But what about *here*? I ask.
> This is a meeting place, he says, a place of many places.
> But whose land is it? Is it Índio land?
> Ah, he says, here, everyone is Índio.

At that moment a low sun breaks out across the moving sea. The afternoon is coming to an end; soon I'll be eaten by the land as it dries and crumbles and its buzzing fragments fly out for blood. It is all Índio land, even if I do not know it.

As I sit and stare, throngs of small crabs emerge from holes in the mud; they each have one enormous, yellow claw, which they start to wave slowly, almost completely in unison, so that soon the ground is thriving with luminous cartilage. On the other side, walls of forest screech and click with hidden monkeys and insects. Between hidden space and the thin shell of my location: this gigantic, sweeping river.

In my dreams, I encounter a wilderness vast as my mind.

[30] Williamson, E. (2015). *The Penguin History of Latin America*. Penguin, p. 175

26.

> "The blowfly on its bed of offal is but a variation of the rainbow. Common forms are continually breaking into new shapes. If we will explore them."[31]

27.

After a couple of days on a riverboat, I could be anywhere. Huddled up on the roof as the boat putters steadily against the flow of the mighty Amazon, a little shivery while the sun creeps up over the river's brown plain, I chat with other travellers while sharing broken crackers and sweet, instant coffee. I'm no longer despondent, only dislocated. The diesel smells the same, and the forest explodes with an olive greenness that from a distance renders it almost archetypal. "Rivers themselves are both the guardians and betrayers of places."[32] My body flows out of the mouth and into the heart.

I am on the path's liquid time.

I have stumbled upon the murky fluid in which our cells float.

Another traveller, a young Dutch woman, notices a lump on her back. A crew member tells her to sit and brings out a first aid kit. He makes a small incision in the lump with a scalpel. Next thing he is slowly pulling out a long, creamy worm from the wound with his tweezers.

The wet, white light enters us and festers in our voids, and then departs, unfulfilled.

28.

The point, I am discovering, is that it's moving. And so the point of view is also moving. There is nowhere to look, or you can look from anywhere. You might try to use your language like tweezers, to pick up that beetle or to pull that petal from that flower, but whatever power the particular might have will be immediately swept up in immeasurable profusion. If I could be a painter, I would be William Robinson, my forms would be "wayward, flamboyant, theatrical, playful, paradoxical" with an "energy that swirls around … and goes pouring out of the frame". Everything would be characterised by "frothy turmoil and fluid interchangeability of forms—of water, foliage, rocks, clouds … All this we might easily call Baroque".[33]

29.

Down into my mind's basin, where I am unborn and can speak only as the code of a collective. I will descend and call like a jaguar through the land's throbbing canopy, its swaying curtain of brown and grey scraggle, or I will rocket into blueness like a parrot. As I fly into space I will

[31] White, *Voss*, p. 429
[32] Raffles, *In Amazonia*, p. 182
[33] Malouf, D. (2011). Making Consciousness and the Created World One. In *William Robinson: the transfigured landscape*. Queensland University of Technology & Piper Press, p. 73

dive into a stream and emerge refreshed. Shaking my coat dry I will call again, and my call will roll through the undergrowth and onwards into the face of my virgin mother, her skin pale as bark or a mound of clay exposed to the sun. And my call will build into the shape of a tree as I shrink into my black spots, the canopy is God. As I fly into silence the ground will be sucked through black burrows, and through rivets in wet hides of sand. Hidden under layers of rotting mulch, the arid country extends for ever and ever. My claws will press into the dry, red never never. I will stop to look closer but I won't be able to focus. Things will lay eggs of things, things will split apart into yet more things, infinite diversity will swell like a balloon, cacophonies of things and more things tumbling over one another, vining in and out of each other, roots splayed in humid earth while their limbs stretch skyward, desperate for that light, which grows ever dimmer, the billowing fecundity scrambling, blossoming, growing larger… until eventually there is nothing, the infinite has collapsed into absolute thinness, thinner than the line of the horizon, the infinite weight of infinite materials compressed into nothing, a nothing so dense that it spreads its erasure boundlessly.

I am walking across the ribs of seconds as they break into space. I'm eating the human of a white, fragile mind. If I hide myself in the clothes that I speak then others might also speak. I take a wobbling, blue canoe into a song they prepared.

Cranes and kingfishers watch me carefully from the edges.

30.

We pitch our tents on a small, sandy mound that pokes from the river in low tide. We'll sleep until the water laps at our dreams.

31.

Nothing but a lone, yellow claw protruding from a hole. In such immensity, my mind insists on it. But stroked by the wind, the trees chatter and shimmy and shimmer, all ebullient performance around their stern, burgundy trunks.

> I am swept down your wide, brown river.
> I am slipping between the spaces that my cells call human.
> I am sli–
> I am skidding across the salt pan of your wide, brown land.
> I land upon the i–

Washed onto the shore by the sea of my hubris, my subjectivity shoots like data across the web. My frail pronoun strikes obstinate resistance, but really I can't find a crack between the singular and the plural.

32.

An island creature, I search for an island.

Over there! I see your thin mound, revealed by sea thought.

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Acknowledgements

The author thanks the editors and referees for their invaluable feedback.