

AMBIGUOUS AUSTRALIAN STEREOTYPES IN CONTEMPORARY FRENCH LITERATURE: THE CASE OF *NULLARBOR* BY DAVID FAUQUEMBERG

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David Fauquemberg's *Nullarbor*, first published in the Collection 'Étonnants voyageurs' by Éditions Hoëbeke in 2007, has just appeared in 'Livre de poche', Collection 'Folio' (May 2009), a sure sign that a book has attained a significant level of popularity in the French literary marketplace. Having already garnered the trappings of success, including the inaugural 'Prix Nicolas Bouvier' at the 'Étonnants voyageurs' Festival in 2007, selection among the top 10 books of the year for *Technikart* magazine, and the top 20 for *Lire* magazine, as well as comparisons with great travel writers such as Melville and Hemingway, London and Chatwin, Fauquemberg seems to have captured the French imaginary of Australia and the fervent praise of those hungry for novelty.

This article seeks to examine how this popular example of contemporary French writing on Australia engages with the well known stereotypes that often appear in exotic travel narratives to the Great South Land. In this way, we will attempt to determine whether Fauquemberg privileges more or less ambiguous representations of the places, the people and the pursuits that contribute to the specificity of the Australian encounters and experiences included in *Nullarbor*.

As Fauquemberg's website amply demonstrates with a long list of laudatory quotes,¹ his reviewers are drawn in by the (hyper)realism and intensity of his writing, combined with the experiential roller coaster ride of a road-movie and the atmospheric punch of a thriller. There is overwhelming praise for his original portrayal of a continent that is too often reduced to stereotypes and *idées reçues*. The blurb promises 'la découverte pour le lecteur d'une Australie bien loin des clichés faciles', and it is certainly the impression of getting under the surface of the great continent's glossy image of sand, sun, sea, surf and sport that has fuelled *Nullarbor*'s critical and popular success.

Neither the paratext nor the critical reception of *Nullarbor* reveals whether it is a true account of the author's travels in Australia or a work of fiction. A biographical cover note announcing the inspiration for the book suggests the events recounted may be real: 'Un périple tragique dans les confins

occidentaux de l'île-continent lui a inspiré ce premier livre', but in personal correspondence, the author has positioned his work closer to the novel than the travel account.

The ambiguity that arises from the generic merging of *roman* and *récit de voyage* is a long debated issue, explored in detail in Percy G. Adams' *Travelers and Travel Liars*. In this work, Adams demonstrates the desire for veracity that permeated much writing from the Renaissance to the eighteenth century, including the memorable examples of Thomas More's *Utopia* and Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*: 'when an age of writers called their stories "histories"—or used in their titles a term for some subtype of history, such as "life", "letters", "memoirs", "journal", "travels", "voyage"—those writers wanted to achieve the appearance, the techniques, the reliability of history at its best, the same reliability that Herodotus had hoped for.'² However, since the nineteenth century, what Philippe Lejeune terms the 'autobiographical pact'—an author's engagement to recount his life in the spirit of truth—has infiltrated literary norms to promote demarcation of the fictional from the factual. Marlo Morgan's infamous tale of spiritual enlightenment amongst the indigenous people of Outback Australia, *Mutant Message Down Under* (1991), is a prime example of how dramatisation of a lived episode can escalate into outrage if not framed within an appropriate genre.³

In *Nullarbor*, his first book, Fauquemberg privileges ambiguity, avoiding generic identification to focus on originality and authenticity—*realism* rather than reality. But in order to render his prose more realistic, might Fauquemberg have sometimes felt obliged, like Marco Polo in his time,⁴ to metamorphose from traveller into travel liar? The constraints for Marco Polo were imposed by the contemporary religious and political prisms through which the world was viewed and described. Paradoxically, the lies relating a monstrous Other therefore seem more plausible than proposing a schema of resemblance. Likewise, partially sketched contours of Australian life, lands and culture in most French minds might compel similar limitations for the twenty-first century French writer, forced to deliver at least some recognisable tropes from the dominant paradigm of Australia in order to be interpreted as realistic.

Such reasoning leads to the question whether the perceived originality of Fauquemberg's writing on Australia therefore corresponds to an ambiguous form of stereotyping. Situating *Nullarbor* in the French-Australian literary

context, and description of the narrative strands of the text, followed by analysis of some of its key tropes, will provide us with examples that illustrate how the apparently conflicting tendencies towards originality and stereotyping are interwoven in this unusual book.

French interest in Australia has waxed and waned several times over the centuries since Marion Dufresne, La Pérouse and D'Entrecasteaux first headed towards the *terres australes*. The most recent phase of attention began with the 'discovery' of indigenous art as aesthetic pursuit rather than ethnological undertaking, led by Karel Kupka, whose collection amassed in Arnhem Land and surrounds between 1950 and 1963 mostly ended up in the Musée National des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie.⁵ The wave of Australian indigenous art exhibitions that ensued in Paris and elsewhere in Europe helped establish and validate Aboriginal work as 'art'. Concurrently, there was a developing fascination with the culture and spirituality of the people who were producing this 'new' form of art. Examples of French writing on Australia started to reappear in the 1970s and rose more or less steadily to peak around the year 2000, when Sydney hosted the Olympic Games. Incidentally, this is also when Fauquemberg was in Australia, even though his book was not published until 2007. Novels and travel writing of varying quality that have been published since this revival in French writings on Australia almost always include reference to the indigenous peoples,⁶ the landscape and more 'exotic' elements of the Australian locale—its distance in time and space from France,⁷ its expanses of desert and magnificent rock formations,⁸ its dangerous fauna and flora⁹—but little attention is paid to contemporary non-indigenous populations or the multicultural urban lifestyle that most Australians lead.

These relatively restricted examples of contemporary French literature set in Australia should be set against a background of popular images of Australia in France. In addition to the glossy travel brochures that depict its wilder aspects, it is through documentaries that introduce the exotic fauna and flora, and mainstream cinema like *Mad Max* or *Crocodile Dundee* that the most prevailing and widespread stereotypes are disseminated. One of France's favourite films from Australia, Peter Weir's *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, has just been re-released in Paris cinemas,¹⁰ reinforcing the representation of Australia's violent, harsh and unpredictable environment.

Contemporary French writers are aware that stereotyped images of Australia no longer have the currency they once had, especially since the

worldwide exposure of Sydney during the Olympic Games. Their task is a difficult one: they want to avoid clichés, but they also want to tap into those unique elements that arouse the French fascination for Australia. This is the point at which ambiguity appears, but various strategies can be employed to resist falling into the cliché trap.

Two of the most critically successful French texts set in Australia—Michel Butor's *Boomerang*¹¹ and Claude Ollier's *Outback, ou l'Arrière-monde*¹²—stand out with their striking titles that immediately evoke stereotypical images associated with Australia. However, their narratives are examples of semiological filtering of the Antipodes,¹³ imbuing it with a poetic symbolism¹⁴ that elevates these works beyond the level of most French writings on Australia.

Obviously, Fauquemberg's *Nullarbor* is playing on this tradition. The distinctly recognisable one word title combined with a cover photograph depicting Australian indigenous people against a desert background (in both editions) belies the tenuous relationship between the Nullarbor and the narrative. The Nullarbor plains represent a small part of the décor, the site of an initiatory crossing that takes the narrator away from metropolitan Melbourne and into the great unknown. However, he does not meet indigenous people there, nor is the passage across the Nullarbor dealt with in much detail, comprising only the first twenty pages of the text.

In this sense, *Nullarbor* is no different from *Boomerang* or *Outback*, as none of these examples focus exclusively on the exotic otherness alluded to in their titles. But whereas Butor's and Ollier's texts present complex meta-narratives that relate encounters with Australia to a broader referential schema, Fauquemberg's work remains anchored in the first degree experiential immediacy that characterises much 'adventure' travel writing, whether set in Australia or elsewhere.

In another sense, *Nullarbor* could be classed as a *Bildungsroman*. The narrator travels to escape the materialistic European lifestyle that he is dismayed to find reconstituted in Australia's urban agglomerations: 'j'avais quitté Melbourne, cette Europe en exil'.¹⁵ In a deliberate departure from civilisation, he embarks on a series of adventures that lead him to a more spiritual world: that of the Aborigines.

The first two chapters trace the young traveller's encounters with non-indigenous people struggling to come to terms with some of Australia's most

extreme landscapes and seascapes. Travelling across the Nullarbor with Adam the poet in a wreck of a Japanese car is an exercise in stamina and blind faith in modern(ish) machinery. Meeting violent bikers who show no respect to the land nor to their fellow travellers (they want to beat up Adam and the French traveller just for being in their vicinity) demands equally naïve acceptance of external forces beyond their control. In this liminal space, nature and culture are both dangerous and violent elements to which the traveller must adapt in order to survive.

The second chapter is the most violent one, describing a commercial fishing expedition that departs from Fremantle during which no rules are respected and both humans and animals are ill-treated. The narrator is again faced with people who seek to dominate nature and force it to obey their command with violence—their only answer to not understanding the natural world in which they live.

This is obviously disappointing for the young man who sees Australia as a 'monde sans prudence, où tout n'est que violence et ruine'.¹⁶ In a third chapter entitled 'Déroute', he expresses his difficulty to identify with any of the cultures he meets: 'Deux mondes hétérogènes sur un même territoire. L'un voulait tout l'espace pour lui, l'autre mourait à petit feu, refusant d'abdiquer, mais trop vieux pour se battre. Je n'appartenais ni à l'un ni à l'autre.'¹⁷

The fourth and fifth chapters take the narrator beyond the Western lifestyle that he is attempting to flee—as implied in the first pages of the book—to meet the Bardi people and observe their ways. But even after living for a few months at Wreck Point, he still does not really belong there and he knows that he can never escape the mould in which he has been cast. This conscious distance enables the narrator to describe what he experiences in a very naïve and sensitive manner, without necessarily replicating the tourist's gaze seeking instant comprehension and categorisation, nor the ethnographer's scientific insularity. The narrator lies somewhere between these two caricatures of the modern traveller, as the author strives to forge a new way of writing about Australia that both draws on and debunks the stereotypes that currently dominate in contemporary French examples.

These stereotypes include the inherently primitivist trope of the *bon sauvage* or noble savage, a very fertile cliché in French literature since Montaigne's essay 'Des cannibales' (1580) extolled the virtues of natural law and simpler social structures of Caribbean peoples. La Hontan extrapolated on

this basis to refine the representations of the noble savage from the beginning of the eighteenth century in *Dialogues curieux entre l'auteur et un sauvage de bon sens* (1705). And whereas Rousseau's nuanced contributions in *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (1755) tend more towards stripping back the corruptive influences of society than idealisation of the 'savage', Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* (1721), Voltaire's *L'Ingénu* (1767) and Diderot's *Supplément au voyage de Bougainville* (begun 1772, published 1798), and their followers, Bernardin de Saint Pierre with *Paul et Virginie* (1787) and Chateaubriand with *Atala* (1801), depicted most 'natives' as beings morally superior to their apparently more civilised European counterparts.¹⁸

However, nineteenth century fictional writing on Australia produced particularly harsh depictions of its indigenous peoples, in keeping with the rhetoric of extreme primitivism and animalistic monstrosity that relegated Australian Aboriginals to the lowest rung on the human scale. Jules Verne described their features as grotesque and simian in *Les Enfants du Capitaine Grant*¹⁹ and Albert Robida's satirical comedy *Voyages très extraordinaires de Saturnin Farandoul*²⁰ placed them squarely in the role of the monkeyman. It was not until the twentieth century that renewed interest in indigenous spirituality inspired by Mircea Eliade's *Religions australiennes* generated a more optimistic image of the Australian Aboriginal, and reflective anthropological studies such as Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes tropiques* questioned the ways in which indigenous peoples were depicted. Arthur Upfield's indigenous tracker epitomises a new breed of indigenous figures in 1950s literature, displaying a vast knowledge of country and in tune with nature but also willing and able to help non-indigenous people learn about the land in which they live. And his name, Napoléon Bonaparte, is not without significance, for Fauquemberg would have undoubtedly come across the perennially popular 'Bony' series in France, and has drawn on this iconic name for his French narrator in *Nullarbor*. The fact that only the indigenous characters refer to him as Napoléon suggests multiple layers of intertextuality, and provides a prime example of the original applications of standard stereotypes that appear in *Nullarbor*.

In order to identify and analyse some key tropes for demonstrating how conflicting tendencies towards originality and stereotyping are interwoven in Fauquemberg's text, it is useful to consider the relationship between exoticism and stereotyping in travel writing.

Although exoticism has suffered from negative connotations since various critics, including Edward Saïd, designated it as a simplified representation of the Other with latent ideological motives, recent research by Jean-Xavier Ridon²¹ and Charles Forsdick²² has recast it as a useful representational tool for reconsidering intercultural relations. In the first instance, the nineteenth century predilection for difference that underpins the exotic perspective implies a variety of stereotyping that arises from an essentially racist point of view: describing other peoples and lifestyles enables the observer to assert the superiority of their own culture. The expansion of stereotypes where the Other is seen as inferior is obviously the model encouraged by colonialism, as explained by Charles Forsdick: '[...] exoticism might be seen as the process occurring in a colonial context whereby the foreign is absorbed into a home culture, essentialized, simplified and domesticated in order to be presented not in the light of its original context but instead according to understandings imposed by the culture into which it is received (understandings often constructed from that culture's deep-seated fears and desires).'²³

Of course, this kind of stereotyping has not disappeared entirely from contemporary travel literature. It can sometimes be a case of latent colonial and racial discrimination, despite the resistance that postcolonial critiques have provided. But it is more often derived from a seemingly innocent form of tourist stereotyping, manifesting when the observer/tourist expects their prejudices to be confirmed. For example, a tourist makes a superficial observation of another country and its inhabitants and then just wants to experience what s/he expected prior to starting the trip. While this viewpoint may be just as condescending as the earlier colonial perspective, it has a different ideological origin: consumerism. The tourist consumes cultural differences and sometimes bends reality to have his or her prejudices confirmed. Graham Huggan relates this form of exotic stereotyping by tourists to the limits of intercultural exchange in a globalised world: 'Exoticism is bound up here, not just in the perception of cultural differences but in the sympathetic identification with supposedly marginal cultural groups. Yet this urge to identify, as manifested in patterns of consumption, often comes at the expense of *knowledge* of culture/cultural groups other than one's own.'²⁴ Reality is therefore filtered to correspond to clichés in a 'disneyisation' of the world.

Colonial and consumerist stereotyping are not necessarily the most prevalent forms to be found in contemporary French travel writings on Australia. In general, these travelling authors are looking for an authentic yet exotic country. They want to discover something outside the realms of their expectations and stereotypes, displaying a desire for difference that is potentially an exploitative kind of third-worldism and yet also hints at a predatory ethnological ambition.

Considering the Australian Aboriginals as noble savages brings to light the shortcomings of third-worldism. Even if they are claimed to be superior, this perception of indigenous people can be condescending. Ethnological works certainly assist in understanding other cultures, but it can also be seen as another process that leads to self-observation and analysis. For instance, Derrida criticises the third-worldism of Lévi-Strauss's vision: 'la critique de l'ethnocentrisme, thème si cher à l'auteur des *Tristes Tropiques*, n'a plus pour fonction que de constituer l'autre en modèle de bonté originelle et naturelle, de s'accuser et de s'humilier, d'exhiber son être inacceptable dans un miroir contre-ethnocentrique.'²⁵

The following examples from Fauquemberg's *Nullarbor* offer a means for analysing the interplay of exoticism and stereotyping in a French context, demonstrating that he goes beyond a simple duplication of the popular belief in the superiority of the noble savage in Australia. In particular, these tropes are representative of the ambiguous tension that Fauquemberg attempts to maintain through alluding to the Aboriginal Australians as noble savages who contribute to the narrator's spiritual awakening, but also in explaining the difficulties experienced in negotiating traditional indigenous and modern non-indigenous lifestyles.

We will examine three principal tropes relating to the site, the inhabitants and the activities that take place in the Australian context to reveal how Fauquemberg's ambiguous Australian stereotypes function in *Nullarbor*. In this way, we will demonstrate how depictions of the natural environment, interactions with indigenous and non-indigenous inhabitants, and the fundamental pursuit of gathering food from the sea—fishing—serve to re-enact exotic stereotyping observed in French writings on Australia and yet perturb the portrait of a faraway land where spiritual enlightenment is freely accessible to those European travellers who seek it.

The natural environment is a fertile source of stereotypes in French travel writing on Australia. Guidebooks, novels, travel magazines and newspaper articles present a fairly uniform vision of an island-continent whose dramatic landscape comprising a scorching red (dead) heart and a coastal fringe of tropical rainforest is paired with an equally idealised seascape beginning with the Great Barrier Reef and ending with Bondi Beach. The cold grey waters of the Southern Ocean are rarely mentioned except perhaps as ideal destinations for hardcore surfers.

Such stereotypical representations of Australian landscapes and seascapes seem to elude the narrator at the beginning of his journey. After abandoning the all-too-European city of Melbourne, he finds himself disappointed by the contradictory nature of the desert: he feels cold in the misty morning and sees trees on the Nullarbor:

Dans le froid humide du petit jour, les premiers rayons du soleil caressaient une brume aux contours incertains. Au-dessus pointait la cime des arbres qui parsemaient la Nullarbor. « Plaine sans arbres ». Les cartographes n'avaient pas eu le loisir de vérifier sur place.²⁶

However, the ensuing description of a parched and empty centre that has been abandoned even by its indigenous inhabitants fulfils more familiar stereotypes:

Les arbres ont disparu, cédant la place à des buissons malingres, gris et bleu, cramponnés au sable. Nous avons traversé des terres aborigènes, sans apercevoir autre chose que les empreintes évanescentes d'un peuple fantôme. Préfabriqués à l'abandon aux toits de tôle rouge, carcasses désossées de bagnoles, le charbon froid d'un feu de camp. Les souches souffreteuses violentées par le vent ajoutaient au lugubre du paysage.²⁷

The contrast between an initial shock at finding that the landscape does not live up to its name and the subsequent satisfaction at the 'Mad Max' style moonscape of the desert offers a first glimpse of ambiguity in Fauquemberg's representations of the natural environment.

The tropical regions in the north-west are equally confusing for the narrator who observes the juxtaposition of unattractive signs of civilisation against a backdrop of lush splendour in the settlement at Wreck Point:

Le premier signe de vie que j'ai aperçu, c'était un château d'eau pointant son dôme rouillé au-dessus des arbres. Des baraquements délabrés, un hangar à bateaux, deux pompes à essence devant un garage, l'ovale en friche d'un terrain de *footie* [sic], une piste d'atterrissage en terre battue. Des allées secondaires coupaient à travers d'épaisses haies de palmiers et d'eucalyptus, qui dissimulaient les maisons au regard. La misère disparaissait au premier abord derrière la luxuriance de la végétation, la chaleur de l'air, l'extraordinaire richesse des couleurs.²⁸

The fact that the positive aspects of the landscape eclipse the negative ones in the tropical zone points to the narrator's willingness to engage with the exotic natural stereotype over the universal signs of poverty and neglect. This hierarchy of images is embraced even more fully in the evocation of an island paradise, the domain of the Bardi people, entirely removed from Western influences:

Un imposant récif dressait sa masse sereine au-dessus de l'océan. Gloria admirait, béate, le bloc de marbre irrigué de veines sombres, criblé de mille cristaux. [...] Ce lieu, c'était l'île idéale des livres de l'enfance, la secrète plénitude de nos muscles intérieurs. Je me serais volontiers endormi.²⁹

This is another typical view of Australia—after the red centre and the luxurious tropical rainforest, the beautiful seaside. It should be noted that what the narrator enjoys the most is the quietness. He even wants to sleep instead of enjoying the place. This ideal island comes directly out of innocent memories of children's books. No evil seems to be hidden on this pristine rock, no unenlightened human being has perverted this asylum.

The narrator's stay with the indigenous leader, Augustus, and his friends is a revelation. At the beginning of his trip, he did not know why he left. He has apparently found his goal, a home, with them, though he is even

confused about how he should feel in these circumstances: 'Si c'est chez soi qu'on est censé être le mieux, alors je me sentais chez moi.'³⁰

The reassuring beauty of the deserted tropical island and seascape is obviously a welcome relief after the experiences at sea aboard the fishing trawler with its feral crew. This earlier episode emphasises the unorthodox voyage of the visitor in austral waters and although the cold, wild seas might be unexpected images for the French traveller, they are entirely usual for those who know the ropes:

La mer avait forci, le bateau cognait violemment dans une houle croisée, cassante. Du grabuge quelque part au nord, sous les latitudes cycloniques. L'océan Indien se montrait fidèle à sa mauvaise réputation.³¹

Strikingly different from the seascape that nurtures the indigenous people, this representation of a ferocious natural environment in which non-indigenous people are pitted against the elements reinforces the dichotomy that places the 'invaders' at a disadvantage, while creating an unanticipated setting for the French traveller in Australia.

In Fauquemberg's text, both landscape and seascape generate ambiguous stereotypes related to the Australian natural environment, with an evident shift towards more predictable images accompanying the narrator's trajectory away from Western civilisation towards the indigenous community near Broome. An analysis of the interactions with indigenous and non-indigenous peoples may nuance this apparent polarisation of the two dominant influences on the French narrator.

The French narrator's interactions with non-indigenous people are mainly concentrated in the earlier chapters of the book. Contrary to the stereotypical condemnation of European 'invaders' that occurs in novels like ADG's *Kangouroad Movie*, there are positive representations of both non-indigenous inhabitants and other tourists in *Nullarbor*. Adam, the poet with whom he crosses the Nullarbor, is one of these kindred spirits:

Je l'aimais bien, Adam. Sa somnolence chronique, sa maladresse, ses interminables silences ponctués d'humeurs fantasques. Le fonctionnement déroutant de sa pensée. Ça faisait des lustres que je ne m'étais pas senti aussi proche de quelqu'un.³²

The traveller meets other nice—and eccentric—non-indigenous people on the way to Wreck Point, mainly in the third chapter ‘Déroute’: an Italian couple, the driver of a truck full of nitric acid, a female soldier going back to her base. But they cannot erase the bad impression left by the violent brutes met on the fishing boat near Fremantle.

The crew of *La perle de la mer* includes a variety of social misfits, thrown together on this small boat that nevertheless functions like an industrial trawler. This space suffers the disadvantages of both a small boat and an industrial boat: since it is a small boat, the narrator cannot escape the other crew members and the constant physical demands of the job are extreme. Bad sea conditions, the difficulty of sleeping and the bleeding from the cuts caused by ropes and hooks are nothing compared to the proximity with extremely violent co-workers, which is psychologically the most damaging part of the trip.

There is only one woman, who is just as cruel and macho as the men:

Greta calquait son attitude sur celle des deux autres. Être femme sur cette nef des fous, ce n'était pas une mince affaire. Alors elle se faisait plus virile que ses deux mentors et jurait sans arrêt jusque dans son sommeil. Elle s'était spécialisée dans les petits poissons. Dès qu'un petit poisson pointait son nez, elle l'attrapait, le plaquait au sol et, du talon, lui broyait lentement la tête pour la vider de son contenu.³³

Her status is confirmed when she loses the tips of three fingers in an accident and suffers great pain through the night with gritted teeth before the boat can return to shore for medical assistance.

The only fisherman with whom the narrator can engage is Billy: ‘Il n’y avait guère qu’avec Billy que je parvenais à m’entendre. Il était novice comme moi, mais pas si malheureux.’³⁴ The others are all foul-mouthed, hard-living adrenalin junkies who call the narrator ‘saleté de Français’,³⁵ or ‘putain d’Français’.³⁶

This identity gradually disappears as the jaded and tortured individual who emerges from the fishing boat hell is re-baptised ‘Napoléon’³⁷ by the indigenous Elder of the Bardi people, Augustus, and initiated into a new way of being in the world. Augustus is a commanding presence who lives up to the stereotype of the wise spiritual master who guides the lost Frenchman towards

his epiphany: ‘Augustus, le maître des lieux, présidait aux débats, conscient d’être au centre de l’attention, et jouant à merveille son statut d’Ancien.’³⁸

Fauquemberg’s description of Augustus is more detailed and nuanced than that of any other character in the book, developing a portrait of a joker over several pages, and setting him up as the model leader for indigenous Australians. The epitome of the noble savage who masters the English language and Western traditions, but maintains high standards in observing the traditional ways of his people, Augustus performs the role of sage to perfection in this stylised and stereotypical formula.

Indeed the episode that is alluded to in the beginning of the text: ‘Voilà comment j’ai tué l’homme’³⁹ and also serves as its conclusion, provides one of the most obvious and unambiguous stereotypes in Fauquemberg’s work. The series of clichés is remarkable: an old crocodile—that brings to mind all the popular images of Australia from Crocodile Dundee to Steve Irwin—is merged with the figure of Augustus in a premonitory elision of features and fate: ‘Maintenant, *Napoléon*, c’est un drôle de croc! C’est comme moi, j’ai pris du gras, j’suis fatigué. On est frères lui et moi, on vieillit en même temps. J’crois bien qu’on partira ensemble, quand ce monde-là voudra plus d’nous.’⁴⁰ In an age-old scenario of Pandorean proportions, the narrator is warned by Augustus not to enter an inlet that is inhabited by the old crocodile: ‘Toi, *Napoléon*, sûr qu’il te louperait pas. Il verrait que t’es pas d’ici, que t’es perdu [...] Il aime pas qu’on l’dérange. C’est chez lui, là-bas. Y a aucune raison d’y aller.’⁴¹ Just before the time comes for the narrator to leave, he decides to go into this forbidden place and of course, having broken the taboo, he is doomed to be snapped up by the crocodile, but is rescued by Augustus, who sacrifices himself to save the foolish Frenchman.

In fact, with the sacrificial death of the most respected and wise representative of the indigenous people to save the life of the French narrator, the text slips suspiciously easily into an imperialist discourse that perpetuates the superiority of the white traveller, elevating the noble savage to true hero status only when his recognition of his subservient status and expendable existence becomes evident through his voluntary sacrifice.

In addition to the overtly stereotypical figure of Augustus, there are also a variety of positive and negative impressions concerning the indigenous people that the narrator encounters in this text. The women tend to be more numerous in this group, ranging from the feisty sister of Augustus, Bonnie, and

her daughter Grace, to Gloria, who act in concert to watch over the welfare of the younger generations.

If Augustus' lifestyle is the model that is the most often followed by the young men, sometimes they fall into the ways of Western wrongdoings. Dylan often over-indulges in drugs. One night, as Augustus is asleep, they smoke marijuana with Isaac:

Ils avaient dépassé depuis longtemps les doses recommandées. Isaac, surtout. Regard fané, épaules affaissées, il était incapable de la moindre parole, du plus petit geste. Dylan, lui, montrait des signes évidents de paranoïa. Quand mes yeux se posaient sur lui, il se raidissait inquiet.⁴²

Drug consumption is traditional among the Aborigines, but it is usually for specific rites. In this instance, the two young men just want to get intoxicated. The narrator admits some flaws in their lifestyle, but attributes them to the contamination by Western civilisation.

In this regard, the welfare state money is paradoxically perceived as a bad thing. There is an episode narrating the wait for the money in Wreck Point, the closest village. Everyone seems to wait for that money to indulge in their personal vice. Just after Gloria describes the spoliation from their island by white people, and their arrival on the mainland, the dependent predicament in which they now find themselves is described:

Dylan et les autres jouaient aux cartes, les yeux dans le vague, riant à tout propos. Son tour passé, chacun se levait pour aller tirer sur la pipe à eau. Au pied de l'arbre, les vieux misaient leurs derniers dollars, abrutis par l'alcool. Les enfants gambadaient d'un groupe à l'autre, simulant des combats à main nue, couchés dans la poussière.⁴³

Every age is hit by the disgrace. Only a few of them, like Augustus, can cope with the change in their traditional lifestyle and the growing influence of non-indigenous habits.

The narrator's interactions with indigenous and non-indigenous Australians certainly produce some ambiguous stereotypes due to the variety of positive and negative figures that are present in his immediate orbit. However,

Fauquemberg's interpretation of the noble savage as the sacrificial offering for the enlightenment of the Frenchman renders this representation of the Australian Aboriginal Elder an homage to the primitivist exotic stereotype of the nineteenth century.

The final trope of fishing as an integral activity involving interaction between human and natural environments, in both the indigenous and non-indigenous contexts, produces an interesting comparison in *Nullarbor*. As mentioned above, the second chapter 'Pêcheurs' relates a very violent fishing campaign undertaken when the traveller stops in Fremantle to earn more money before going north towards Broome and Darwin. The quickest way to make money is to sign up for a stint on a fishing boat, but this fishing trip bears no resemblance to the romantic journey recounted in Michèle Decoust's *L'Inversion des saisons*, for example.

The narrator's fellow fishermen (and one fisherwoman) are 'machines à tuer' that terrorise each other as well as the better known 'machines à tuer'—the sharks inhabiting the Indian Ocean that are slaughtered to harvest illegally their valuable fins for the Asian market. Reversing the cliché of 'les dents de la mer', Fauquemberg takes this iconic and dangerous stereotype of the shark-infested waters around Australia and turns it on its head.

While the French narrator might be impressed by the captured shark and respects its strength as 'un guerrier' and 'un taureau dans l'ultime tercio',⁴⁴ it is clear that the inexperienced fisherman has a romantic view of his new job. The other fishermen bring him back to a cruel reality that shows the only danger is for the animals:

De toutes mes forces, j'ai soulevé la gueule du requin. Bruce a tiré à bout portant. Déflagration ahurissante. Le requin est tombé sur le dos, secoué d'effroyables spasmes. Pris de fureur, Bruce lui a balancé une seconde décharge. « Enculé d'requin! » Il n'avait plus la force de résister, mais il n'était pas mort. Un œil pendait sur le côté, arraché à l'orbite. Du revers de la main, j'ai essuyé les lambeaux de cervelles, les éclats de cartilage qui me criblaient le visage.⁴⁵

This extremely violent chapter is rooted in venal exploitation, but goes further to link the fishermen's actions with torture and madness in a truly horrifying display of revenge for the fish that the sharks have eaten while hooked:

Curt lui a asséné un coup de pied dans la tête. « Tiens, connard, pour les thons! » [...] A l'écart Bruce approuvait l'action d'une voix qui trahissait la jouissance. « Putain t'es cinglé toi! » Dans sa bouche, ça sonnait comme un compliment. Puis il s'est approché poignard en main. Une danse macabre s'est engagée. A tour de rôle, les bourreaux traçaient des lignes sanglantes sur le corps gris de l'animal. Il y avait dans leur ballet toute la folie des hommes. Je n'étais pas de taille à m'y opposer.⁴⁶

These gruesome passages contrast sharply with the last two chapters in which the narrator goes on a series of fishing trips with Augustus and the Bardi people who respect nature and take only what they need for themselves and their family. This trope obviously illustrates the fundamental differences between non-indigenous and indigenous lifestyles. The narrator evokes the peaceful harmony of the fishing party, when Augustus shows his skills, like a reversed mirror image of the violent one in Fremantle:

Il a empoigné une lance, s'est figé à trois mètres du bord, dans l'eau jusqu'à la taille, l'arme dressée au-dessus de sa tête. Sa posture, son imperturbable équilibre n'avaient plus rien d'humain. Il faisait partie du décor, comme les palétuviers, sur l'autre rive. [...] Vu du bord, l'événement avait des allures de miracle.⁴⁷

This miracle stands in stark opposition to the nightmare that occurred on the commercial fishing boat. The humanity of the fisherman is sublimated in nature and the human being is completely integrated into his natural environment. There is no struggle, no hatred in the act of taking fish. This fishing party reconciles the young traveller with his fellow human beings.

Besides the beauty of the fishing, its economy also reassures him. On several occasions, the narrator is reminded that one should not take more than what is needed. One such occasion involves a rare argument, when the tide surprises and endangers the fishermen and Augustus gets angry:

Augustus s'est éclairci la voix. « Balancer du poisson? Hé, Radu, tu connais les règles, non? La pêche, c'est pas un jeu. Quand tu fais quelque chose sers-toi de ta tête. Demande-toi: "Pourquoi j'fais ça?" La pêche comme le reste. S'laisser avoir comme ça,

j'comprends pas. D'avant les gamins, en plus. Ça t'apprendra à être gourmand. L'avidité, c'est... » Sa voix s'est soudain étranglée. Regard embué, il a disparu dans sa chambre.⁴⁸

Greed is but one of the dangers that threaten the indigenous peoples in Fauquemberg's text, leading to dependency on external subventions and internal turmoil within the communities. But the manner in which this message of potential corruption is conveyed adds subtlety and charm rather than heavy-handed preaching.

As in the other tropes considered, the activity of fishing affords scope for both clichés and innovations, but in these examples, there is a clear tendency towards original representations of indigenous and non-indigenous practices with regard to fishing in an exotic Australian environment.

Although there are certainly several stereotypes that are recycled and even reinstate some quite regressive discourses concerning slave-like service to the white master, there are nevertheless fruitful efforts to recast the popular images of Australia's natural environment, populations and activities. In the context of contemporary French writing on Australia, Fauquemberg does demonstrate a serious contribution to revitalising the narrative, especially in the first chapters of *Nullarbor*.

It is therefore possible for engaged travel writers to go beyond the pedestrian repetition of *idées reçues* to offer valuable insights and observations about the lands that they visit and how they themselves are changed by their experiences. However, it is almost inevitable that an author will reuse at least some clichés when writing about Australia, in order to create a shared knowledge base and draw in readers seeking an exotic literary adventure at the other end of the world.

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Notes

- 1 <http://davidfauquemberg.com/>
- 2 Percy G. Adams, *Travelers and Travel Liars, 1660-1800*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1962, p. 89.
- 3 Marlo Morgan's bestselling account of her enlightening stay with indigenous people was initially presented as a factual account, but the author was forced to acknowledge publicly that it was fictional after its validity was contested by indigenous and non-indigenous protestors. For further information on Morgan's literary misrepresentation, see Cath Ellis, 'Helping Yourself: Marlo Morgan and the Fabrication of Indigenous Wisdom', *Australian Literary Studies*, vol. 21, n° 4, 2004, pp. 154-160.
- 4 Syed Manzurul Islam, *The Ethics of Travel*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1996; Frances Wood, *Did Marco Polo Go to China?*, London, Secker & Warburg, 1995.
- 5 For a lyrical interpretation of Karel Kupka's part in promoting Australian indigenous art in Europe, Nicolas Rothwell's *The Red Highway*, Melbourne, Black Inc, 2009.
- 6 Patricia Hamou's exhaustive study of this phenomenon, *Figures de l'aborigène dans l'imaginaire français*, PhD Thesis, University of Sydney, 2005, traces the permanence of the indigenous trope in French writings on Australia—see also Patricia Hamou, 'De l'usage pseudo-scientifique de la taxinomie dans le thèses du racialisme français au XIX^{ème} siècle', *Explorations*, n° 41, December 2006, pp. 25-41—as does Colin Dyer's *The French Explorers and the Aboriginal Australians 1772-1839*, St Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 2005.
- 7 Michelle Decoust, *L'Inversion des saisons*, Paris, Robert Laffont, 1987.
- 8 Patricia Gotlib, *Australiades. Voyage d'une Parisienne aux antipodes*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1999.
- 9 Félicie Dubois, *L'Hypothèse de l'argile*, Paris, Flammarion, 1997.
- 10 *Le Monde*, 14 August 2009.
- 11 Paris, Gallimard, 1978.
- 12 Paris, P.O.L., 1995.
- 13 Michael Spencer, *Letters from the Antipodes*, St Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1981; Jean-Charles Gateau, 'Miroir' in *Abécédaire critique*, Genève, Droz, 1987, pp. 129-149.
- 14 Mireille Calle-Gruber et Claude Ollier, *Les Partitions de Claude Ollier*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1996.
- 15 *Nullarbor*, Paris, Éditions Hoëbeke, 2007, p. 11.
- 16 *Nullarbor*, p. 9.
- 17 *Nullarbor*, p. 83.

- 18 An overview of the various literary sources for the myth of the 'bon sauvage' can be found in Bernard Mouralis's *Montaigne et le mythe du bon Sauvage, de l'Antiquité à Rousseau*, Paris, Bordas, 1989.
- 19 J. Hertz, Paris, 1867-8.
- 20 Paris, Librairie illustrée, 1879.
- 21 *Le Livre en son miroir : Essai sur quelques tentatives de réinvention du voyage au XXe siècle*, Paris, Éditions Kimé, 2002; and with Élodie Laught (eds), *Nouvelles lectures de l'exotisme*, Nottingham, University of Nottingham, 2005.
- 22 *Travel in Twentieth Century French and Francophone Cultures: The Persistence of Diversity*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005.
- 23 'Revisiting Exoticism: From Colonialism to Postcolonialism', in Charles Forsdick and David Murphy (eds), *Francophone Postcolonial Studies: A Critical Introduction*, London, Arnold, p. 48.
- 24 *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, New York, Routledge, 2001, p. 17.
- 25 *De la Grammatologie*, Paris, Éditions de Minuit, 1967, pp. 167-168.
- 26 *Nullarbor*, p. 12.
- 27 *Nullarbor*, pp. 16-17.
- 28 *Nullarbor*, pp. 115-116.
- 29 *Nullarbor*, p. 156.
- 30 *Nullarbor*, p. 130.
- 31 *Nullarbor*, p. 37.
- 32 *Nullarbor*, p. 22.
- 33 *Nullarbor*, p. 61.
- 34 *Nullarbor*, p. 60.
- 35 *Nullarbor*, p. 45.
- 36 *Nullarbor*, p. 52 and 58.
- 37 *Nullarbor*, p. 104.
- 38 *Nullarbor*, p. 103.
- 39 *Nullarbor*, p. 9.
- 40 *Nullarbor*, p. 163.
- 41 *Nullarbor*, pp. 162-163.
- 42 *Nullarbor*, p. 169.
- 43 *Nullarbor*, pp. 160-161.
- 44 *Nullarbor*, p. 49.
- 45 *Nullarbor*, pp. 49-50.
- 46 *Nullarbor*, pp. 56-57.
- 47 *Nullarbor*, pp. 108-109.
- 48 *Nullarbor*, p. 176.