

Fears of 'white decline' show how a minor dent to domination can be catastrophic for some

What is certain is the fragility of white control over the colonial world

By Ghassan Hage
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Whether conceptualised intellectually as “The Great Replacement”, or “Whiteshift”, in books by rightwing thinkers, or in a less articulate way on the internet as the fear of an invasion by Muslim refugees, or through the deployment of a more apocalyptic imaginary of white decline as in the manifesto of Christchurch’s white ethno-nationalist mass murderer, there is an increasingly available literature portraying people of white European origins as being in a state of decline. As about to suffer a total reversal of circumstances and become dominated by the very people who have long themselves been dominated by Europe.

Unlike what some think this is hardly a new phenomenon. It is actually the case that a feeling of being besieged by the very people whom one is actually colonising is, paradoxically, part and parcel of the history of European colonialism.

Images of Asians, Indigenous people, Arabs, and black people dominating, exploiting, and enslaving white Europeans abound throughout the history of colonialism. This is so even at the height of the “classical” European colonial venture when colonialists were, relatively speaking, most secure about their entitlements and their transnational supremacy.

As Stephen Arata, a professor of English at the University of Virginia, has pointed out, such narratives of “colonial reversal” where the “civilized” world is on the point of being overrun by “primitive” forces, and where the colonisers become colonised and the exploiters become exploited, were frequent in late-Victorian popular fiction in

Britain. Arata argues that these discourses of reversal intensified when the empire was in crisis.

For Australians, it is not that long ago that Pauline Hanson invited us in her book, *The Truth*, to meet the president of the “Republic of Australasia” in the year 2050: Poona Li Hung, “a lesbian ... of multiracial descent, of Indian and Chinese background”. And it is perhaps not surprising to see the theme of “reverse colonisation” re-emerging at the very time when we began witnessing the waves of asylum seekers that accompanied the reintensification of western colonial military interventionism in the world, especially the Middle East, and that began with the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and was followed up by the US-led western invasion of Iraq.

One of the classic literary expressions of these fantasies of reversal has been Michel Houellebecq’s *Novel Soumission* (2015). This is a novel pertaining to imagine a peaceful and democratic Islamic take over of France which ends up generating a creepy sexist dictatorial social and moral order, and a whole new class of French “collaborators” who happily join in, lured by all kinds of sexual and financial benefits. The fact that we are talking about a novelist of the stature of Houellebecq should not deter us from thinking that he is capable of producing something of that paranoid order. As Arata points out many a good novel belong to the genre, from Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* to HG Well’s *The War of the Worlds*.

It is helpful to note today in the era of climate change that the fantasies of reversal that are part and parcel of the history of colonialism have also been part and parcel of the history of domesticating nature. Here too we have a long history of fearing that the nature that we humans have domesticated and exploited in a quasi-colonial way will rise against us and domesticate us in turn.

Indeed, novels moved by an imaginary wherein the plant and animal world “reclaim” the human domain of the built environment abound. And in much the same way as with the colonial fantasies of reversal, humans have ended up imagining worlds where we are ruled by the very animals we have dominated. *Planet of the Apes* is the most obvious example of this imaginary circulating in popular culture. In his novel 2007 the Australian naturalist Robyn Williams (2001) also takes us into a world where a more generalised process of reversal is under way: whales sink Japanese whaling vessels, pelicans occupy Heathrow airport, cows invade Tullamarine airport in Melbourne, Amazonian pythons attacking developers’ bulldozers, etc.

These natural fantasies of reversal raise the same issues raised in relation to their colonial equivalents. It goes without saying that the fears are real. But it is not clear to what extent the imagined threat of reversal itself is real.

In both the case of white colonial control over non-whites as well as in the case human control over nature, what is certain is the fragility of white/human control over the colonial/natural world. That the fragility of this domination gives birth to such fantasies of decline and reversal is more an indication of an incurable psychology of domination. That is, what we are dealing with are people whose viability is predicated on being dominant.

Humans who cannot see themselves other than in a relation of domination with the natural world and whites who, despite their protestations of being anything but racist, find it hard to be in anything but a dominant colonial position vis a vis non-white people.

It is only for such people that even a minor dent to the fantasy of domination that sustains them ends up being imagined as a catastrophic threat of disintegration.

• *Ghassan Hage is a professor of anthropology and social theory at the University of Melbourne. Some of the themes dealt with in this piece are developed in Hage's book Is Racism an Environmental Threat?*