

Postcolonizing the Australian Corpus: Indigeneity in the Fiction of Alexis Wright, Kim Scott, Sally Morgan, and Mudrooroo



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*Indigeneity in the Fiction of Alexis Wright,  
Kim Scott, Sally Morgan, and Mudrooroo*

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# Introducing the Uncanny

## *Europe's Antipodean Mirror*

"Aboriginal corporeality—the embodied being of Aborigines—remains a troubling and disturbing fact for settler Australia."<sup>1</sup>

### A Lost Sense of Home

This study of Indigenous-Australian literature has its seeds in a concern with the uncanniness embedded in multicultural developments in contemporary Western societies and how this affects identity formation. As such, the manifestation of the uncanny allows us to look into how postcoloniality and postmodernity link up. These are times when European identity is in flux, but there have been others. In a well-known essay published in 1919, Sigmund Freud reflected on the decline of Empire and on the Great War that had been questioning Europe's modernity, and analyzed the existential anxiety of the period in terms of the uncanny: a disquieting, even frightening sensation rooted in the familiar becoming strange.<sup>2</sup> A century after the publication of Freud's essay, this unsettling feeling of estrangement from a known and secure world, a kind of postmodern homesickness, one might claim, has returned as a universal feature of the West. Through the study of Australian literature, I aim to trace how the uncanny is activated in contemporary multicultural matters, how it dislocates eurocentrism, and how its manifestation gestures toward identity's redefinition along the parameters not only of race/ethnicity but also of gender and class. While the uncanny reveals itself as instrumental in dissolving discrete borders and boundaries of self, why the choice of postcolonial Australia as the focus of this investigation?

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Morrissey, "Dancing with shadows: Erasing Aboriginal self and sovereignty," in *Sovereign Subjects: Indigenous Sovereignty Matters*, ed. Aileen Moreton-Robinson (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2007): 65.

<sup>2</sup> See Chapter 1 for a detailed discussion.



Settler Australia started out as a penal colony, and as Michel Foucault pointed out in his study *Discipline and Punish* (1977) on the great changes in the penal systems of the Western world in the modern age,<sup>3</sup> it is such margins as the penal system that highlight what is symbolically central in any society. Australia, as a continental prison at the outposts of empire, played such a role with its impoverished white convict population vis-à-vis British civil society. But the island continent also constituted a racial outpost in the shape of its Indigenous peoples vis-à-vis Britishness. In his groundbreaking 1978 study,<sup>4</sup> Edward Said puts Foucault's ideas on the key significance of the marginal to use in his analysis of the ethnic Other as the uncanny foil that enables the definition of metropolitan whiteness. In our globalizing world, it is at the postcolonial margins that the values of the metropolitan center are most successfully interrogated and—to paraphrase another groundbreaking volume in postcolonial literature studies<sup>5</sup>—written back to. Thus, the liminal geographical and cultural locatedness of the postcolonial enables the highlighting of cultural difference, diversity, and incompatibility to such an extent that postcolonial “micro-narratives” unmask and undo what François Lyotard has called Western “metanarrative” or “grand narrative.”<sup>6</sup> Grand narrative is founded on the fiction of European modernity: i.e. the universalist claim to the world's perfect knowability through science, the linear progress of history, and the possibility of full individual freedom. In reality, grand narrative hides an underlying agenda that has served to crown the West in a position of global economic, political, and cultural superiority in the modern age. Or, as Said puts it,

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<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, tr. Alan Sheridan (*Surveiller et punir*, 1975; New York: Random House, 1977).

<sup>4</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism. Western Conceptions of the Orient* (1978; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995).

<sup>5</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths & Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London & New York: Routledge, 1989). A second, revised edition of this study was published in 2002.

<sup>6</sup> François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, tr. G. Bennington & B. Massumi (*La Condition postmoderne: Rapport sur le savoir*, 1979, tr. 1984; Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984): xxiii–xxiv.

the major component in European culture is precisely what made that culture hegemonic both in and outside European identity as a superior one in comparison with all non-European peoples and cultures.<sup>7</sup>

*Postmodernity*, however, shows itself precisely in “incredulity towards metanarratives”<sup>8</sup> and questions the eurocentric worldview the latter can be understood to obscure and support. This postmodern incredulity, then, can be usefully fleshed out from postcolonial positions.

Thus, this study takes an Antipodean, former outpost of the West as its point of departure, since the uncanny is a *liminal* concept blurring cohesive definitions of Self and Other, and therefore inextricably linked with the geographical margins of the postcolonial; it obtains most forcefully at the tense Indigenous/non-Indigenous interface of the so-called European settler nations. Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa are postcolonial nations in the Southern Hemisphere that have been politically controlled by settlers from the old imperial center and built on white self-definition.<sup>9</sup> The case of Australia is especially instructive in terms of the manifestation of the uncanny because of its troubled convict heritage and ongoing uneasy relationship with its Indigenous communities, which, in the absence of a treaty, was largely articulated through the official policy of multiculturalism and has evolved into the debate about Constitutional recognition and sovereignty as expressed in the Uluru Statement from the Heart.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 7.

<sup>8</sup> François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, xxiv.

<sup>9</sup> My research is not concerned with the postcolonial literatures arisen in the settler nations located in Latin America, which are not founded on an Anglo-Celtic self-definition and use Spanish and Portuguese as their vehicle languages.

<sup>10</sup> The Uluru Statement from the Heart was issued in 2017 at the National Constitution Convention which united representatives of the sway of Australia's First Nations. It calls for “meaningful recognition” of the Indigenous-Australian peoples by their inclusion in the Australian Constitution, and claims special status for Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders as members of the First Nations, who never ceded their sovereignty (Final Report of the Referendum Council. Commonwealth of Australia 2017: i (<https://www.referendumcouncil.org.au/final-report> [accessed 06 May 2018])). This issue would have to be decided in a national referendum as debated by successive governments and parliamentary commissions as of 2010, although PM

Tariq Modood writes that the concept of multiculturalism as assimilative of immigrants into Western society has shifted toward a notion of equality as cultural difference. This is especially the case with ethnicity, nationality, aboriginality, and religion—categories harder to reduce than that of the mere ‘immigrant’. Ever since the 1960s, identity politics have vaunted “a positive self-definition of group difference” as more liberating. The notion that ethnicity, gender, and class are public areas of contestation and inform access to political power and opportunities to prosper is basic to the understanding that

allegedly ‘neutral’ liberal democracies are part of hegemonic cultures that systematically de-ethnicize or marginalize minorities. Hence, the claim that minority cultures, norms, and symbols have as much right as their hegemonic counterparts to state provision and to be in the public space, to be ‘recognized’ as groups and not just as culturally neutered individuals.<sup>11</sup>

This definition of multiculturalism links up with Homi Bhabha’s distinction between cultural *diversity* and cultural *difference*. As cultural difference may translate into incommensurability—one (majority) worldview not being able to accommodate other (minority) ones within the same nation space—its institutional management in liberal democracies aims to neutralize and contain the centrifugal impetus of difference by promoting the concept of cultural diversity. As Bhabha says in “The Third Space,”

multiculturalism represented an attempt both to respond to and to control the dynamic process of the articulation of difference,

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Malcolm Turnbull’s recent rejection of the Uluru Statement shows how difficult it remains to move beyond symbolic recognition of the First Nations and to constitutionally embed their Indigenous voice into Parliament.

<sup>11</sup> Tariq Modood, “multiculturalism,” in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Politics* (1996; Oxford UP, 2003; Answers.com 2009), <http://www.answers.com/topic/multiculturalism> (accessed 9 July 2009).

administering a *consensus* based on a norm that propagates cultural diversity.<sup>12</sup>

It is in the assimilating and dissimilating interplay of multicultural diversity and difference that the search for Australianness is played out. Thus, the manner in which multicultural developments contest Australia's eurocentric self-definition is indicative of how we need to refocus our management of postmodern identity predicaments on both the private and the public level. This study will concentrate on postcolonial Australian *literature* to argue the latter point, since a sense of national, group, and individual identity is chiefly established through *narrative*, as the Tasmania-based US scholar Lucy Frost has pointed out.<sup>13</sup>

In order to establish how the definition of Australianness has undergone shifts in valency, the term 'postcolonial' deserves special attention.<sup>14</sup> Australia is, in fact, an odd member of the postcolonial margins and has had an ambiguous, troubled relationship with its still-extant metropolitan center, Britain, as well as with its own oppressed Aboriginal peoples. How colonized has Australia been as a society, and how colonizing? In a discussion of the ground-breaking postcolonial study *The Empire Writes Back* (1989),<sup>15</sup> Ella Shohat argues:

[its] authors expand the term post-colonial [sic] to include all English literary productions by societies affected by colonialism [...] This problematic formulation collapses very different national-racial formations—The United States, Australia, and

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<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Rutherford, "The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990): 207–209.

<sup>13</sup> Lucy Frost, "Fear of Passing," *Australian Humanities Review* 5 (March–May 1997), <http://www.lib.latrobe.edu.au/AHR/archive/Issue-March-1997/frost.html> (accessed 9 June 2005).

<sup>14</sup> Even to the extent of spelling: Ashcroft et al. prefer to hyphenate the term to denote the process of decolonization in its wide sense as opposed to the moment of political independence from the metropole, whereas Boehmer, a South African scholar living and working in the UK, does the opposite. I will use Boehmer's convention to denote my European situatedness. See Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, and Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995).

<sup>15</sup> Ashcroft et al., *The Empire Writes Back*.

Canada on the one hand, and Nigeria, Jamaica, and India on the other as equally 'post-colonial.' Positioning Australia and India, for example, in relation to an imperial center, simply because they were both colonies, equates the relations of the colonized white-settlers to the Europeans at the 'center' with that of the colonized indigenous populations to the Europeans. It also assumes that white settler countries and emerging Third World nations broke away from the 'center' in the same way. Similarly, white Australians and Aboriginal Australians are placed in the same 'periphery', as though they were co-habitants vis-à-vis the 'center'. The critical differences between the Europe's genocidal oppression of Aboriginals in Australia, indigenous peoples of the Americas and Afro-diasporic communities, *and* Europe's domination of elites in the colonies are leveled with an easy stroke of the 'post.' The term 'post-colonial,' in this sense, masks the white settlers' colonialist-racist policies toward indigenous peoples not only before independence but also after the official break from the imperial center, while also de-emphasizing neocolonial global positionings of First World settler-states.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, when we speak of the margins of the (ex-)British Empire, white-settler colonies such as the USA, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia all form part of them due to having been colonized by the British metropole. However, if we use the West in its widest sense, as all those societies that take European origins—political, historical, economic, cultural, and that politically-incorrect notion 'biological'—as their main referent, these white-settler colonies must be included as agents in neocolonialist policies at home and abroad. In fact, the denomination 'white-settler nation' uneasily straddles notions of colonizer and colonized, and the occurrence of the postcolonial uncanny can be located precisely in this ambiguity.

Therefore, the exact focus of this investigation is the margins within the margins: the literature produced by a minority group enjoying special status in the Australian multicultural constellation. These are the Indigenous Australians—the Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders—whose prior (i.e. pre-colonial) presence and situatedness

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<sup>16</sup> Ellen Shohat, "Notes on the 'Post-Colonial'," *Social Text* 31–32 (1992): 102–103.

question mainstream claims on the national space. Their literary manifestations can be considered a tool in the articulation, authorization, and redefinition of eurocentric Australianness within the process of 'decolonizing' and 'postmodernizing' Australia. How this leads to uncanny inscriptions of identity that question and blur rigid boundaries of race, class, and gender will be analyzed in the work of four novelists who focus on a rewriting of the Australian physical, textual, and identitarian landscape from an Indigenous point of view.<sup>17</sup> Thus, this study inscribes itself in the unresolved, uncanny tension between the need for effective political strategies of Indigenous entitlement and the very dissolution of the race, gender, and class boundaries with which essentialist discourses fix Indigenous and non-Indigenous subjectivities alike.

### **Too Close for Comfort?**

As to multiculturalism, Tariq Modood also writes that, in its most liberal configurations of openness to difference, it "has had a less popular reception in mainland Europe," where it has boosted support for extreme nationalist agendas in elections. As Modood observes, this has notably been the case in France, where first Jean-Marie LePen's and later his daughter's Front National party has long pursued a xenophobic policy regarding immigration. As it stands, in France,

multiculturalism is opposed across the political spectrum, for it is thought to be incompatible with a conception of a 'transcendent' or 'universal' citizenship which demands that all 'particular' identities, such as those of race, ethnicity, and

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<sup>17</sup> I am tempted to put Indigenous in inverted commas here to indicate that the entitlement to use an Indigenous voice has been strongly disputed in the public arena and has affected these four authors in different ways as to their perceived Indigeneity, but I will not do so, in order not to invoke constantly the issue of entitlement. To my knowledge, only Alexis Wright's Indigeneity has been wholly undisputed within the Indigenous community, whereas Mudrooroo's has been completely rejected.

gender, which promote part of the republic against the good of the whole, be confined to private life.<sup>18</sup>

The current state of multiculturalism in Western Europe, the geographical and cultural location this study is written from, has been the object of heated debate. The strong development of the global economy, dislocation, and supranational integration, and the ongoing political, economic, and cultural links with ex-colonies after the demise of European empires have spurred ever-increasing flows of immigrants. Such immigration, mostly from the Arab world, Africa, South-America, Asia, and Eastern Europe, is associated with poverty, poor education, and a different cultural and religious baggage. While Western Europe was the cradle of the colonial project that sent its surplus population across the seas in previous centuries, the combined effect of the migratory influx and economic slump has raised general concern that the Western European continental fringe is, yet again, no longer able to absorb its population growth economically, socially, and culturally. The widespread perception that especially Muslim immigrants do not assimilate into the host culture but will outnumber 'us' and take over 'our' society has boosted racist attitudes. These have also been accompanied by an uncanny fear of the denaturalization of European identity and values, and of a loss of privileges for the mainstream population. Particularly striking in this regard is how reconfigurations of the ethnic do not take place in isolation, but feed into a reassessment of class and gender notions as well.

The case of the Netherlands is illustrative, and I take it as my point of departure because I was born and raised there. My home country has always led the way in terms of a progressive politics of tolerance and social reform in Western Europe. Yet, one of the most striking and disturbing developments in contemporary Dutch politics has been the virulent, overpowering development of a populist racist discourse against immigration—reminiscent of Australia's One Nation Party's racist populism against Asians and Indigenous Australians in the 1990s.<sup>19</sup> It exemplifies the uncanny turmoil in which Dutch national

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<sup>18</sup> Modood, "multiculturalism," 2003.

<sup>19</sup> On 21 February 2010 the Dutch center-left coalition government fell as the result of the Dutch involvement in the UN Afghanistan mission. Ensuing elections brought a

identity finds itself, defining it as shifting territory in these times of global migratory movements. It may well be that *Holland*, which is—rather than the formal *Nederland*—the term the Dutch use to denote emotional closeness to their country and a feeling of homeliness, has become unrecognizably strange.

In June 2007, a major national newspaper published an illustrative article by two scholars at the University of Amsterdam, assessing the general state of feeling surrounding the question of immigration in relation to ‘Dutchness’. In their analysis, significantly entitled “All of The Netherlands is homesick,” the issues of ethnicity, class, and gender interlink and develop in the crucible of the uncanny:

The debate on immigration has reached a new stage: that of emotionalism. Full integration is no longer a question of doing, but increasingly one of feeling [...] The issue of ‘feeling at home’ has presumably moved to the centre of public and political debate, because diverse groups of native Dutchmen—from homosexuals and feminists to people from disadvantaged, so-called ‘problem neighbourhoods’—have increasingly lost a sense of home due to (their perception of) Muslim immigration. They project their own feelings of discomfort onto these immigrants, who they find hard to imagine with an established sense of belonging to the Dutch host country. Moreover, the thought that ‘they’—the newly arrived—might possibly feel at home while ‘we’ feel estranged is difficult to digest. They were surely our guests, our ‘guest workers’? Should they not conform and

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strong third position for the xenophobic Party for Freedom—Partij voor de Vrijheid or PVV, led by active gay-rights campaigner and ex-communist Pim Fortuyn initially and the vociferous Geert Wilders at present; with almost 25% of the vote, PVV put a check on the usual policy of coalition governments and created a serious deadlock in Dutch politics. PVV’s power was somewhat curtailed in the 2012 general elections and 2014 European elections: it occupies 12 out of 150 seats in the Dutch House of Representatives, 9 out of 75 in the Senate, 66 out of 570 in the States-Provincial, and 4 out of 26 in the European Parliament with roughly 10% of the vote in elections overall. Given the general tendency in European migration policy, PVV can count on steady support in years to come. As the parliamentary system in the Netherlands is very fragmented, Dutch governments are always an assemblage of two to four parties, which means that PVV’s position is more decisive than these percentages may suggest.



assimilate? Have ‘we’ not got the oldest rights? In the heyday of the Pim Fortuyn ‘revolt’, it was especially those native Dutch people living in disadvantaged urban areas who no longer felt at home in their ‘own’ neighbourhood, because it was being ‘taken over’ by immigrants. Fortuyn aptly coined the concept of the ‘homeless nation’, and that was a telling image [...] The increasing emotionalism of the integration debate has made for a nostalgic and melancholic tone so far. The undercurrent is one of homesickness, the longing for a lost home; of reaching out to what is on the verge of being lost but may still be kept [...] This increased sensitivity is also exclusionary. It places those who have an ‘original’ right to ‘our’ home in an advantaged position. Of course, they completely belong. Their views on what it means to feel at home become the touchstone for the newly arrived.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Jan Willem Duyvendak & Evelien Tonkens, “Heel Nederland heeft heimwee,” *De Volkskrant* (Amsterdam; 23 June 2007), <http://zoek.volkskrant.nl/artikel?text=duyvendak&FDOC=0&SORT=presence&PRD=1w&SEC=het%20Betoog&SO=%2A&DAT=%2A&ADOC=0> (accessed 27 June 2007): B01 (my translation). Pim Fortuyn was an ex-communist and gay activist who headed racist discourse in recent Dutch politics. About to enter Parliament with a landslide victory, he was assassinated by a mentally disturbed environmentalist of Dutch ancestry just before the national elections of 2002. The original article in Dutch runs as follows:

Het integratiedebat is in een nieuwe fase beland: die van de emotionalisering. Volwaardige integratie is niet langer een kwestie van doen, maar steeds meer van voelen [...] ‘Thuis voelen’ is vermoedelijk zo centraal komen te staan in de publieke en politieke discussie, omdat uiteenlopende groepen autochtonen—van homo’s en feministen tot en met bewoners van probleemwijken—zich hier door (hun beeld van) islamitische immigranten minder zijn gaan thuis voelen. Zij kunnen zich moeilijk voorstellen dat deze migranten zich hier wel thuis voelen, waar zij dat zelf door hun aanwezigheid minder of niet meer doen. Ook is de gedachte dat ‘zij’—de nieuwkomers—zich hier mogelijk wel thuis voelen terwijl ‘wij’ ons vervreemd voelen, moeilijk verteerbaar. Zij waren immers onze gasten, ‘gastarbeiders’? Horen zij zich dan niet te conformeren en te assimileren? Hebben ‘wij’ niet de oudste rechten? Ten tijde van de Fortuyn-revolte waren het vooral autochtone bewoners van achterstandswijken die zich niet meer thuis voelden in hun ‘eigen’ wijk, omdat deze werd ‘overgenomen’ door migranten. Fortuyn sprak in dit verband over een ‘onthemde’ natie. Dat was een raak beeld [...] De emotionalisering van het integratiedebat is tot nu toe nostalgisch,

This notion of homesickness, the nostalgia for a lost Dutch home and identity, can be extended to Western Europe as a whole. Immigration has become too close for white-European comfort, so that a formerly open-armed reception of the immigrant is rapidly turning into an attitude of unfeigned rejection. As a consequence, projects of multiculturalism and asylum policies are questioned and redefined to serve a more conservative, restrictive agenda. The ‘War on Terror’ waged after the Twin Towers attack in New York on 11 September 2001, the referendum debacle of the new European Constitution (which was felt to curtail national identities and therefore vetoed by France and the Netherlands in 2005), the landslide xenophobe conservative victories in the 2009 and 2014 European elections, and the Syrian refugee crisis of 2015—all exemplify a general swing to the political right which has turned European nationhood and identity into hotly debated issues, as Britain’s intended exit from the EU, ‘Brexit’ may also illustrate. While a sense of an established home is increasingly lost, the battlements in defense of ‘Europeanness’ are disturbingly raised. Applying a restrictive definition of cultural diversity, Europe is moving from the recognition of cultural difference to the mainstream imposition of an overarching concept of assimilative sameness. Is Europe right in turning to the right?

### **Too Far for Discomfort?**

The distant shores of Australia offer an Antipodean mirror to put multicultural tensions in Europe into a manageable perspective. This may avoid an essentialist approach that nostalgically turns a blind eye to a process of intercultural contact that is surely impossible to reverse, potentially enriching but often perceived as a threat by Europe’s mainstream population. Australia, while seemingly at a far physical and

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melancholisch. De grondtoon is heimwee naar een verloren thuis; reiken naar wat we misschien nog net kunnen behouden [...] De emotionalisering is ook uitsluitend. Zij plaatst degenen die hier van huis uit al ‘thuis’ zijn in een bevoorrechte positie. Zij horen er immers helemaal bij. Hun opvattingen over wat het is om je ‘thuis’ te voelen in Nederland, worden maatgevend voor de nieuwkomers.

spiritual remove from contemporary European turmoil, has long raised disturbing questions about national identity and a sense of home. As a settler nation of European stock, Australia casts its postcolonial definition of Self and foreigner/Other in ways which put Western essentialist philosophies to the test and sound an uncanny warning to current European positioning in multicultural matters. On the one hand, as a long-standing destination for immigrants, Australia has had a multicultural head start, being “among the first nations to constitute models of state multiculturalism, that is, to include multiculturalism as an official component in their national definitions,” whereas “the European Union is the latest organisation attempting to grapple with the questions and tensions untidily grouped together under that unsatisfactory term: multiculturalism.”<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, what makes the Australian case especially appropriate for understanding and coming to terms with the disquieting tensions that affect contemporary Europe is the fact that immigration in Australia includes *all Europeans*. Europeans have only settled the island continent over the past two centuries and, in doing so, wrought havoc upon Australia’s Indigenous population. It is no doubt fair to say that, whatever the intentions, the ups and downs of the Australian political and legal climate regarding Indigeneity over the past decades have not substantially improved this population’s disadvantaged situation.

Australian multiculturalism has been operative as a policy since the 1970s on the initiative of successive Labor governments, although in recent years conservative rule has limited its presence as an active political instrument in multicultural relations. It was initially promoted to respect cultural diversity and “to lay to rest both the iniquitous White Australia policy<sup>22</sup>—which had officially started with the Immigration

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<sup>21</sup> Sneja Gunew, *Haunted Nations: The Colonial Dimensions of Multiculturalisms* (London: Routledge, 2004): 1.

<sup>22</sup> The umbrella term ‘White Australia policy’ covers a series of legal measures and policies implemented between 1901 and 1973, with the aim of restricting non-white and favoring European immigration to Australia. In its attempt to keep Australia ‘white’, it is linked to Australian policies toward the Aboriginal population through most of the twentieth century.

Restriction Act of 1901<sup>23</sup>—and the official immigration policy of assimilation “by addressing a series of material, educational and social needs of non-Anglo-Celtic, often Asian minorities.”<sup>24</sup> However, in the 1990s multiculturalism also overlapped with Indigenous activism and specific policies regarding land rights, as it aimed to accommodate the Indigenous minority, hitherto largely ignored, into Australian mainstream society.<sup>25</sup> As official Australian colonial history was being rewritten, government policies swung toward differential treatment of the Aborigines with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (1990), Aborigine-inclusive multiculturalism, the founding of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation in 1992, and the changes in the native title legislation as of 1993. Positive discrimination toward the First Nations and the possibility for them to regain ownership of some of their tribal land, up to then a legal impossibility in most states, have nevertheless been seen as a serious threat by conservative mainstream society. They have become a source of uncanny tension, in that they defamiliarized white mainstreamers from a territory they felt to be ‘naturally’ theirs, thus creating a symbolic national space that was increasingly perceived as unhomely by the mainstream.

Bulldozed as the white mainstream was into what they felt to be a minority position and suffering from what they presumed were unjustified assaults on rights and properties inalienably theirs,<sup>26</sup> a white backlash against the new multiculturalist ideas was led by John Howard’s Liberal Party, Tim Fischer’s National Party, and Pauline Hanson’s ultra-conservative One Nation Party in the mid-1990s. After a landslide victory, the first two parties formed a conservative government in 1996 that was in power for three consecutive terms until

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<sup>23</sup> Ien Ang, “From White Australia to Fortress Australia: The Anxious Nation in the New Century,” in *Legacies of White Australia: Race, Culture and Nation*, ed. Laksiri Jayasuria, David Walker & Jan Gothard (Crawley: U of Western Australia P, 2003): 51.

<sup>24</sup> Sneja Gunew, “Denaturalizing cultural nationalisms: multicultural readings of Australia,” in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990): 103, 115.

<sup>25</sup> Paul Keating, “Australian Launch of the International Year for the World’s Indigenous People,” in *Apology Australia* (1992), <http://www.apology.west.net.au/redfern.html> (accessed 29 March 2002); Mudrooroo, *The Indigenous Literature of Australia: Milli Milli Wangka* (Melbourne: Hyland House, 1997): 1.

<sup>26</sup> Ken Gelder & Jane Jacobs, *Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity in a Postcolonial Nation* (Melbourne: Melbourne UP, 1998): xii.

2008, aided by an unfavorable attitude nationwide toward ethnic policies after the 2001 World Trade Center attack. Consequently, the conservative establishment implemented more restrictive policies on immigration, epitomized in the Asian asylum seeker/*Tampa* crisis of August 2001.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, it also cut back on recent achievements for the Indigenous population, projecting them as an 'undeserved' privilege and a problematic political heritage, while refusing to acknowledge that retribution for past atrocities is due.<sup>28</sup> This was given further traction by the Howard administration's Northern Territory Emergency Response of 2008, which has seriously curtailed Indigenous rights in remote communities ever since and has insisted, again, upon their assimilation to the mainstream way of life. Such a backlash notwithstanding, which denotes that the Indigenes have come too close for mainstream comfort, "Mabo<sup>29</sup> and the New Australian History end the historical silence about the Aboriginal precolonial and colonial past upon which the conservative invention of Australia and Australianness

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<sup>27</sup> Ang, "From White Australia to Fortress Australia," 52. In August 2001, the Howard Government refused the Norwegian freighter *MV Tampa* permission to enter Australian waters. The vessel had rescued 438 Asian asylum seekers traveling in precarious circumstances from drowning in international waters. When the *Tampa* entered Australian waters, the Prime Minister ordered the ship to be boarded by the Australian special forces. At the United Nations' 65th plenary meeting on 27 November 2001, the Norwegian government alleged the Australian Government failed to meet obligations to distressed mariners under international law. The Howard government quickly reacted by passing the *Border Protection Bill* in the House of Representatives, which claimed Australian sovereignty to determine who will enter and reside in Australia. The Howard Government finally opted for the so-called offshore 'Pacific Solution', taking the asylum seekers to Nauru, a Micronesian island administered by Australia, New Zealand, and the UK, where their refugee status was considered, rather than upon entry in Australia. This policy has not substantially altered since then, though the twin facility of Manus Island has been closed since then under pressure of Papua New Guinea.

<sup>28</sup> Lorenzo Veracini, "Of a 'contested ground' and an 'indelible stain': a difficult reconciliation between Australia and its Aboriginal history during the 1990s and 2000s," *Aboriginal History* 27 (2003): 233.

<sup>29</sup> The court case which the Indigenous land right fighter Eddie Mabo won against the state of Queensland in 1992 was the prelude to the new Native title legislation.

was founded.”<sup>30</sup> Consequently, any sense of national belonging for white Australian settlers must involve a coming to terms with the Indigenous “skeleton at the feast.”<sup>31</sup>

Bearing in mind these developments, it should come as no surprise that, “although Aboriginals are numerically a small proportion of Australia’s population, their importance in the construction of Australian identity is disproportionate.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, in his official address to the nation on Australia Day<sup>33</sup> in 2002, the environmental scientist Tim Flannery defined the attempt to incorporate the Aborigine into Australian identity as necessary and inevitable, but also problematically tied to a reckoning with past atrocities:

We can’t celebrate Australia Day unreservedly, nor can we expect Aboriginal people to celebrate it, unless we somehow come to terms with that terrible history [...] Certainly I don’t mean to suggest that the European aspects of our history are irrelevant or should be disposed of—only that they reflect us as a people who have not yet developed deep, sustaining roots in the land. Yet Australia—the land, its climate and creatures and plants—is the only thing that we all, uniquely, share in common. It is at once our inheritance, our sustenance, and the only force

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<sup>30</sup> Rosemary Hunter, “Aboriginal histories, Australian histories, and the law,” in *In the Age of Mabo: History, Aborigines and Australia*, ed. Bain Attwood (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1996): 13.

<sup>31</sup> Peter Read, *Belonging: Australians, Place and Aboriginal Ownership* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000): 1-2.

<sup>32</sup> Bob Hodge & Vijay Mishra, *Dark Side of the Dream: Australian Literature and the Postcolonial Mind* (1990; Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1991): xiv. In 2006 the Indigenous population was about half a million of a total Australian population of 21 million, largely of European descent (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006: 5).

<sup>33</sup> Australia Day, 26 January, commemorates the landing of the First Fleet in Sydney Cove on that day in 1788, which marked the beginning of transportation of British convicts to Australia. It is—as the official Australian government web page tendentiously claims—a public holiday when “we come together as a nation [to] celebrate what’s great about Australia and being Australian”—see “Australia Day,” [http://www.australiaday.gov.au/about\\_ad.asp](http://www.australiaday.gov.au/about_ad.asp) (accessed 21 July 2005). Aboriginal people may instead speak of Invasion Day, Sorry Day, Shame Day etc. There have been campaigns to shift Australia Day to a different, less controversial date, one of which recently became successful in the city of Fremantle, WA.

ubiquitous and powerful enough to craft a truly Australian people. It ought to—and one day will—define us as a people like no other.<sup>34</sup>

In an analysis of some larger scope, the Dutch–Indonesian–Australian scholar Ien Ang holds that the combined effect of Indigenous and non-European immigrant inclusion into mainstream society makes “a racially exclusionary white Australia [...] no longer practically feasible or morally acceptable.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, the specificities of the Antipodean reversal of settler primacy may show that solutions for the European multicultural predicament cannot be found in a one-way assimilative thrust; it suggests a redefinition not only of the ethnic Other but also, and perhaps more importantly, of the eurocentric Self.

In subsequent sections and chapters, the terms ‘Aboriginal’ and ‘Indigenous’ and their derivatives will be capitalized to differentiate their Australian specificity from non-Australian counterparts. For reasons of practicality and style, these terms will be used indifferently to refer to the Indigenous Australian population as a whole, including the Torres Strait Islanders, but this is by no means to imply their cultural homogeneity. The terms ‘white’ and ‘whiteness’ will indicate belonging to the European-oriented, especially Anglo-Celtic, Australian mainstream. For the purpose of my argument, the lexical fields of Indigeneity, Indigeneity, race, and ethnicity require some disambiguation.

### **Indigenous Reality in the Real**

The concept of Indigeneity denotes membership in the Indigenous communities, who have lived on the Australian continent for many thousands of years, long before its European occupation started.<sup>36</sup> Sneja

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<sup>34</sup> Tim Flannery, “Australia Day Address 2002: The day, the land, the people,” *Australia Day* (2002), [http://www.australiaday.com.au/tim\\_welcome.html](http://www.australiaday.com.au/tim_welcome.html) (accessed 18 July 2005).

<sup>35</sup> Ang, “From White Australia to Fortress Australia,” 53.

<sup>36</sup> The landing of the First Fleet in Sydney Cove on 26 January 1788 marked the beginning of the European colonization of Australia, when transportation of British convicts to Australia was initiated. Allegedly, Aboriginal populations lived in the

Gunew, an Australian authority in the field of multiculturalisms, argues that race is a category that, in the Australian context, has been applied to Indigenous peoples. Race and Indigeneity conflate as the “symbolic marker of unabsorbable cultural difference,”<sup>37</sup> whereas Australianness is reserved for an often unacknowledged white “Anglo-Celtism.” Ethnicity, however, was formerly “the codename given for those more recent immigrant settlers who do not conveniently derive from Britain or Ireland and who interrogate these neat [binary] categories” (20). She argues that ethnicity was postulated to “circumvent[-]the racist history of ‘race,’” and therefore associated with absorbable cultural difference. Thus, this term offered the possibility to *choose* “the groups to which one belonged and within them also choose what to preserve as part of an imagined past” (21). If we understand the ethnic as any manifestation of cultural rather than (a racist interpretation of) presumed biological difference, what has often been understood as the Indigenous Australian’s unabsorbable difference—a feature beyond choice—is undoubtedly the most important but not the only ethnic marker in the Australian context. Gunew states:

[the] chain of signification around difference as modernity and European civilization has, in the Australian context, allowed the Anglo-Celtic descendants of the settler colonizers to construct their English ethnicity against the differences of not only the indigenous peoples and those in the surrounding Asia-Pacific, but as well, paradoxically, those ‘multicultural others’ many of whom in the wake of postwar migration came precisely from what is traditionally cited as continental Europe or the West. (10)

While according to Gunew Indigeneity retains enduring racial connotations in the new millennium, the concept has nevertheless become highly contested in contemporary Australia and has moved beyond biological fixity. Marcia Langton writes that “the label

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Australian continent as early as 60,000 years ago, or since time immemorial, as they themselves say.

<sup>37</sup> Ien Ang and John Stratton, quoted in Sneja Gunew, *Haunted Nations*, 100. Further page references to Gunew are in the main text.



Aboriginal has become one of the most disputed terms in the Australian language," and points out that the vast wealth of legal definitions reflect not only white obsession with but also uncertainty and confusion about the status of the Indigenes.<sup>38</sup> One of the main problems surrounding the term is its signification within Western epistemology. The word 'Aborigine' (Lat. 'from the origins') is of European coinage, and it is nowadays generally acknowledged that, from the binary us-and-them perspective of the white colonizer, it blurs the distinctions among the different groups of Indigenous inhabitants of the continent, such as Nyoongars, Nangas, Yolngus, and Murris, to name just a few of the long list of extant nations. Thus, in an article on contemporary Indigenous Australian writing, the critic Joan Newman follows the Indigenous writer Eve Mumewa D. Fesl's cue by opting for the Indigenous word 'Koori'<sup>39</sup> to make general references to the Indigenous peoples of the continent. She reserves Nyoongar, Murri etc. for different Indigenous nations and "reject[s] the term 'Aboriginal' as a proper noun [so as not] to participate in the colonial project."<sup>40</sup>

While I am sensitive to Newman's criticism and aware of the word's descriptive limitations, I will maintain the term 'Aborigine' and its derivatives in this study, as they still have a role to play in a strategic rather than essentialist use of identity politics. As Graham Huggan asserts, "*strategic* authenticity remains a useful political weapon" in the struggle for ownership of Indigenous cultural expression, and goes against the, probably unintended, danger of disenfranchisement

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<sup>38</sup> Marcia Langton, "Well, I heard it on the radio and I saw it on the television..." *An essay for the Australian Film Commission on the politics and aesthetics of filmmaking by and about Aboriginal people and things* (North Sydney: Australian Film Commission, 1993): 28.

<sup>39</sup> See Joan Newman, "Commitment and Constraint: Contemporary Koori Writing," in *From a distance: Australian writers and cultural displacement*, ed. Hazel Rowley & Wenche Ommundsen (Geelong, Victoria: Deakin UP, 1996): 83–84. As she explains, 'Koori' is the term by which people from some Indigenous Australian nations in New South Wales and Victoria refer to themselves, following a wider trend among Indigenous Australians to reject the word 'Aboriginal', as it was imposed on them by Europeans. Traditionally, Koori means 'person' or 'people' and has currently evolved to denote any 'Indigenous person from south-eastern Australia', but Newman expands its scope of reference to the whole of the continent.

<sup>40</sup> Newman, "Commitment and Constraint," 83–84.

provoked by the promotion of hybridity and heterogeneity in postcolonially-inspired academic output.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, Ella Shohat argues:

Postcolonial theory's celebration of hybridity risks an anti-essentialist condescension toward those communities obliged by circumstances to assert, for their very own survival, a lost and even irretrievable past [...] The question [...] is not whether there is such a thing as an originary homogeneous past, and if there is whether it would be possible to return to it, or even whether the past is unjustifiably idealized. Rather, the question is: who is mobilizing what in the articulation of the past, deploying what identities, identifications and representations, and in the name of what political vision and goals?<sup>42</sup>

Inevitably, the present study inscribes itself in the unresolved, *uncanny* tension, I will claim, between the need for effective political strategies for Indigenous empowerment and the very dissolution of the class, race, and gender boundaries which fix Indigenous subjectivities. While it is evident that Indigeneity and race cannot be fixed as mere biological givens, and are just forms of acquired cultural difference along with class and gender, it is nevertheless for reasons of political effectiveness that I will refer to Indigeneity in terms of race in this study. This seems a dangerous game to play indeed, but the term 'race', as a discursive reference to past (and present) racist policies, may highlight the Aborigines' special minority status in multicultural Australia. Thus, it may wield the necessary political leverage in a strategic employment of identity politics. For the same reason, I shall employ 'ethnicity' to refer to non-Anglo-Celtic cultural difference other than Indigeneity.

Despite its forbidding and deceptively essentialist homogeneity, then, the definition of Indigeneity has been the object of important shifts in perception over the last five decades. As recent as the 1960s, being considered Indigenous meant to be stripped of all civil rights, and to be seen as a member of a subhuman species that had "failed the evolutionary test and [was] doomed to extinction."<sup>43</sup> The first attempts

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<sup>41</sup> Graham Huggan, "Postcolonialism and Its Discontents," *Transition* 62 (1993): 133.

<sup>42</sup> Shohat, "Notes on the 'Post-Colonial'," 110.

<sup>43</sup> Mudrooroo, *The Indigenous Literature of Australia*, 92.

at multiculturalism, after the protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s had left their mark on Australian society and politics, proposed merely assimilationist strategies to accommodate the Indigenous segment of the population. Under the latter, Indigenes were coaxed to give up their Indigenous for a whitewashed identity—provided their skin color and factions thus allowed. Nevertheless, the issue of Australian identity would take a different but no less controversial turn in the 1990s, when Indigeneity was imbued with more positive content and differential treatment was accorded through the new legislation on Indigenous land rights and the move toward Aborigine-inclusive multiculturalism.

Sneja Gunew therefore holds that, nowadays, the differences between ethnicity and (Indigeneity as) race are increasingly erased:

Models attempting to locate the absolute grounds of racial difference [through associations with so-called biological givens] have been displaced by analyzes establishing the mechanisms of racism and racialized forms of power which result in certain groups gaining ‘race privilege’.<sup>44</sup>

Gunew’s analysis highlights that Indigeneity should be seen as just another manifestation of ethnicity, and argues for an investigation of the ways in which the white mainstream has managed to maintain positions of power in Australian society through the application of racially inspired policies. One way to do the latter is to investigate how ‘race privilege’ has taken on a disturbing shape in Australia and acquired political profile. In the Mabo context of Australian Common Law and Aborigine-inclusive multiculturalism, Indigeneity has been seen as ‘over-privileged’ by conservative factions of the mainstream public.<sup>45</sup> This is a development somewhat similar to the perception of ethnicity in contemporary Europe but also different, in that the threat comes from the ‘stranger within’ rather than ‘the stranger without’, heightening its uncanny potential.

With the Mabo Judgment of 1992, the Australian High Court revoked the legal concept of *terra nullius*, which had denied human occupation of

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<sup>44</sup> Gunew, *Haunted Nations*, 21.

<sup>45</sup> Gelder & Jacobs, *Uncanny Australia*, 17. Further page references are in the main text.

the Australian territory prior to British settlement and ignored the Indigenous presence and landownership for over two hundred years of white colonization. When the Native Title Act came into being in 1993 as part of Australian common law, it endowed the Indigenous Australians with the legally endorsed possibility to retrieve lands they had lost in the process of white colonization (135–136). This remapping of the Australian territory with its (Ab)original inhabitants, together with the development of positive discrimination policies toward the Indigenes, led to an unsettling of Australian national identity that unleashed all sorts of uncanny tensions. Neither place nor identity could any longer be assigned according to Western standards alone, thus dislocating white essentialist readings of Australia in a disturbing reversal of settler primacy (135, 138). What is more, while white Australians might recognize the need for redress for past wrongs toward the Indigenes, this would clash with fear regarding their own potential loss of privilege and property (17). Suddenly, those who were able to assert Indigenous ancestry could claim privileges—government funding in areas of health, housing, and schooling, access to and ownership of tribal land etc.—which until then had been reserved for the white mainstream. Thus, white resistance was rife, notably among pastoralists of European stock and mining lobbies in rural Australia, who felt that the Indigenous population were becoming entitled to too much.

In such a regime of Indigenous entitlement, in which white legitimacy was under threat, it became legally necessary to authenticate belonging to tribal groups and to fix the conditions under which Indigenous belonging would apply, thus putting essentialist/racist pressure back on the definition of Indigeneity. While progressive white scholars such as Kent McNeil and Henry Reynolds have pointed out that this demand for authentication is unfair,<sup>46</sup> the matter has turned out to be highly problematic for a considerable proportion of the Indigenous population. Many of Indigenous descent have lost all trace of their origins, not least by displacement from their traditional lands; by the denial of

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<sup>46</sup> See Kent McNeil, "Racial Discrimination and Unilateral Extinguishment of Native Title," in *Australian Indigenous Law Reporter* 45 (www.austlii.edu.au 1996), <http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/AILR/1996/45.html> (accessed 20 April 2007). See also Henry Reynolds, *The Law of the Land* (1987; Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin Australia, 2003).

Indigenous ancestry within their own families due to feelings of shame and the need to survive; and by the searing effects of the Stolen Generations—the institutionalized, forced removal of children of mixed descent from their Indigenous families between 1910 and 1970.<sup>47</sup>

As “any construction of identity, whether individual or collective, relies on *narrative* to produce a defining shape,”<sup>48</sup> literature has been a parallel field affected by the authenticity debate, in which Indigenous authors have become enmeshed in the need to defend the literary value of their writing as well as the truth of the underlying personal and communal histories told. These writers have developed different textual strategies to meet scrutinizing mainstream eyes concerned with what is disparagingly described as poor copies of European precedents and/or unfair and untruthful accounts of the European settlement of Australia. Instances of factual and fictional Indigenous writing respond to the unequivocally political agenda of rewriting Australian history on Indigenous-friendly terms by testifying to and critiquing the destructive effects of neo/colonialist policies.

Thus, the articulation of Indigeneity as the sovereign right to decide who does and does not belong to the Indigenous segment of the Australian population and the right to represent and speak on behalf of the Indigenous community have become highly contested ground. It involves different lobbies such as tribal groups, academia, politicians, judges, lawyers, pastoralists, and mining industries, disputing who may determine what Indigeneity entails so as to negotiate access to, or denial of, newly acquired rights and privileges regarding Australia’s resources. This political impetus explains why the debate has been so heated and why Aborigines often refuse any non-Indigenous participation. In 1993, just at the onset of Aborigine-inclusive multiculturalism and the implementation of the new Native Title legislation, the Indigenous historian and critic Jackie Huggins expressed her sovereign claim to define her identity:

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<sup>47</sup> See Katherine Ellinghaus, “Absorbing the ‘Aboriginal Problem’: controlling interracial marriage in Australia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries,” in *Aboriginal History* 27 (2003): 196. Ellinghaus points out that such a “removal of [part-Aboriginal] children became common practice in all Australia as the [twentieth] century progressed.”

<sup>48</sup> Lucy Frost, “Fear of Passing” (emphasis added).

Foremost I detest the imposition that anyone can define my Aboriginality for me and my race. Neither do I accept any definition of Aboriginality by non-Aboriginals, as it insults my intelligence, spirit and soul and my inheritance.<sup>49</sup>

And a good decade later Sneja Gunew, a self-defined *ethnic* Australian scholar now living in Canada,<sup>50</sup> ironically pointed out how the controversy over the right of self/definition continued: “There appears to be an interesting battle here around who may lay claim to ‘our Natives’.”<sup>51</sup>

Stephen Pritchard illustrates Gunew’s point with an incisive analysis of how Australian courts may de-authorize Indigenous spokespeople when these attempt to claim their rights. To complicate matters, the case referred to, the Hindmarsh Island Bridge affair of 1995–96, maps strongly across gender, as it involves a claim on a sacred site connected to Ngarrindjeri women’s beliefs and traditions.<sup>52</sup> One may wonder to what extent the court was less willing to concede the claimant tribeswomen a fair deal because what was under scrutiny was ‘women’s business’; it is in this vein that Pritchard echoes the legal concept of *terra nullius* when coining the term *vox nullius* to express the court’s effectively silencing these women.<sup>53</sup>

But the discussion has spilled over into other terrains as well. In a Foucauldian analysis of an important academic debate on discourses of Indigeneity carried out in the journal *Oceania* in 1992 and 1993, Carolyn D’Cruz claims that identity politics is first and foremost about the right and entitlement to speak for a minority. Before anything else, the speaker has to “satisfy the criteria of bearing the marker of identity

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<sup>49</sup> Jackie Huggins, “Always was always will be” (1993), in *Blacklines: Contemporary Critical Writing by Indigenous Australians*, ed. Michèle Grossman (Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne UP, 2003): 60.

<sup>50</sup> Her father has Bulgarian and her mother German ancestry.

<sup>51</sup> Gunew, *Haunted Nations*, 47.

<sup>52</sup> Stephen Pritchard, “Between Fact and Fiction: The Hindmarsh Island ‘Affair’ and the truth about secrets,” *Jouvert* 4.2 (2000), <http://social.chass.ncsu.edu/jouvert/> (accessed 15 June 2006).

<sup>53</sup> “The term ‘business’ is often used to name a broad and diverse range of Australian Aboriginal sacred, ritual, or customary practices and beliefs” (Stephen Pritchard, “Between Fact and Fiction”).

that one is speaking about.” Thus, the issues of the entitlement to speak and represent as well as Indigenous authenticity have been constant objects of debate.<sup>54</sup> Carolyn D’Cruz cites David Hollinsworth, who, as the non-Indigenous instigator of the *Oceania* debate, highlights what is at stake in this discussion:

the means of claiming, contesting and authenticating Aboriginal identity are central to both the future of Aboriginal Studies as an academic area of study and to political and ideological struggles over Australian nationalism and the position of indigenous peoples within it.<sup>55</sup>

Such a discursive interpretation of Indigeneity is, of course, an eminently *strategic* view of Aboriginal *positionality*.

### **Indigenous Identity in the Literary**

The present study aims to look at Australian identity from an unsettling viewpoint, that of the ‘Indigenous’ writer. The novels chosen stage the interplay of gender, class, and Indigeneity, Australia’s prime marker of ethnicity,<sup>56</sup> and interrogate Australianness as the belonging to a male heterosexual middle-class Anglo-Saxon/Celtic canon, tracing how such interplay becomes a “vexed issue”<sup>57</sup> in Australian literature. Alan Sinfield’s cultural-materialist premise that “we might think of the literary text as a particularizing pattern laid across the (changing) grid of social possibilities”<sup>58</sup> is particularly useful here. Taking the material

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<sup>54</sup> Carolyn D’Cruz, “‘What Matter Who’s Speaking?’ Authenticity and Identity in Discourses of Aboriginality in Australia,” *Jouvert* 5.3 (2001), <http://social.chass.ncsu.edu/jouvert/> (accessed 15 June 2006).

<sup>55</sup> D’Cruz, “‘What Matter Who’s Speaking?’” quoting David Hollinsworth, “Discourses on Aboriginality and the Politics of Identity in Australia,” *Oceania* 63.2 (1992): 137.

<sup>56</sup> Gelder & Jacobs, *Uncanny Australia*, 98. They argue that, although in Australia ethnicity “is not just specific to Aboriginal people [...] the latter] put their ethnicity to use as a primary social category. It has a socially binding force to which even those other groups who may regard themselves as ‘ethnic’ may not be able to appeal.”

<sup>57</sup> Gunew, *Haunted Nations*, 100.

<sup>58</sup> Alan Sinfield, “Introduction” to *Society and Literature 1945–1970*, ed. Alan Sinfield (London: Methuen, 1983): 3–4.

bases of literature as a point of departure, we may assume that fiction documents the frictions between social viability and its restrictions, between reality and desire, between the disillusion of the present and the illusions of the future. Thus, Indigenous literature reflects no less than the contradictory tensions in multicultural developments that contemporary Australian society struggles with, embodying Indigenous difference in a complex interplay with gender and class.

These tensions may be termed uncanny, in that they defamiliarize accepted conceptions of identity by returning the repressed. The unsettling phenomenon of being in place and out of place simultaneously, which Indigenous literature maps out as the estranging text/ure of postcolonial landscape, appears as a distinctive trait of the Australian identitarian context. In defining people as ambiguously un/settled in the (conceptual) space of Australia, the activation of the uncanny marks the temporal and psychological distance yet to be covered in order to achieve a definition of Australianness that fully acknowledges, tolerates, and empowers difference. This calls for respectful reciprocity rather than the silencing, effacing, and policing of cultural and biological assimilation imposed on the Indigenous peoples in not so distant years—and perhaps never given up, as long years of conservative Howard government have recently shown. In the latter sense, the postcolonial moment does not necessarily signify a clean “passage into a new period and a closure of a certain historical event or age, officially stamped with dates”<sup>59</sup> but must be interpreted as in process.

This unsettling distance is fostered by what Hodge and Mishra once defined as a non-Indigenous construction of the Indigenous Other out of “the minimal material threat and the maximal threat to legitimacy,”<sup>60</sup> in which nowadays the former element can be seen to have disturbingly increased as well. Thus, my concern is with the articulation of Indigeneity within an agenda of “postcolonising”<sup>61</sup> multicultural Australia so as to undo the inversion of primacy that for so long enthroned white Australians as the rightful owners of the land. More

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<sup>59</sup> Shohat, “Notes on the ‘Post-Colonial,’” 101.

<sup>60</sup> Hodge & Mishra, *Dark Side of the Dream*, 25.

<sup>61</sup> Aileen Moreton-Robinson, “‘I Still Call Australia Home’: Place and Belonging in a White Postcolonising Society,” in *Uprootings/Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration*, ed. Sara Ahmed et al. (London: Berg, 2003): 37.



specifically, I am interested in the textual strategies that Indigenous authors may follow to rewrite the Australian physical, textual, and identitarian landscape; how the articulation of Indigeneity may lead to uncanny inscriptions of their fiction; how the latter may question and blur rigid boundaries of class, gender, and race; and how this ultimately points toward less essentialist, more performative notions of identity, thus deconstructing mainstream notions of Australianness.

Literature plays its own particular role in the construction of a nation and a concomitant national identity. At the time of the *Oceania* debate, the cultural studies scholars David Hodge and Vijay Mishra drew attention to

the massive effects on this enterprise that arise from the nature of the foundation of the modern Australian state, as the unjust act of an imperial power whose direct beneficiaries have still not acknowledged that injustice nor succeeded in constructing a viable alternative basis for their legitimacy.<sup>62</sup>

They explained their interest in Australian literature as an arena where such a “doomed quest for symbolic forms of legitimacy” is played out.<sup>63</sup> In this sense, the authenticity debate, as a discourse on the legitimation of identities, strategically links up with literary manifestations. Thus, Sneja Gunew argues:

The question of authenticity continues to haunt the reception of minority writings. In the struggle for minority rights and the battles over who controls representation there are those who take the position that only members of such minority groups have the authority, or at least moral right, to represent themselves. But who, institutionally speaking, decides the group membership and who interprets and legislates whether this authenticity has been achieved?<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Hodge & Mishra, *Dark Side of the Dream*, x.

<sup>63</sup> Hodge & Mishra, *Dark Side of the Dream*, x.

<sup>64</sup> Gunew, *Haunted Nations*, 69.

Similarly, Joan Newman argues that “the designation ‘Aboriginal’ writer” is problematic:

Although there is now an increasing production of Aboriginal literature, its classification, legitimacy and validity are constantly under inquiry by both Koori and non-Koori critics.<sup>65</sup>

As I speak and write from a non-Indigenous, European academic background, the present study therefore entails conceptual problems which need highlighting. First of all, I articulate my ideas within the framework of Western university studies of literature(s) in English, whose First-World institutionalization tends to confer universal legitimacy on them. I should stress that such legitimacy is by no means intended or assumed and therefore open to interrogation.

Secondly, as a white, middle-class, heterosexual Dutchman living and working in Spain I inevitably approach Indigenous Australian literature from a perspective that is burdened with European cultural baggage, which encapsulates the danger of a neocolonialist reappropriation of the Indigenous Other. As Edward Said says, “no production of knowledge in the human sciences can ever ignore or disclaim its author’s involvement as a human subject in his own circumstances.”<sup>66</sup> However, I would like to defend my project by foregrounding my interest in Indigenous writing inasmuch it *interrogates* and *rewrites* traditional Western perceptions of race/ethnicity, gender, and class—and therefore: myself. The scope of Australian Indigenous writing in English is not limited to Indigenous readership alone but has an important function in speaking out to the rest of the world. As the Indigenous writer Alexis Wright has stated, “the ambition I have for my work is to be published, to be read in Australia, to be read overseas. For the whole world to read it.”<sup>67</sup> Indigenous Australian literature demands that non-Indigenous outsiders listen carefully and learn to unfix the rigid boundaries of race/ethnicity, class, and gender which for so long

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<sup>65</sup> Newman, “Commitment and Constraint,” 84. We will address this more deeply when dealing with the novelist Mudrooroo in chapter three.

<sup>66</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 11.

<sup>67</sup> Alexis Wright, “Politics of Writing,” *Southerly* 62.2 (2002): 19.

have tended to define subject positions in an Orientalist<sup>68</sup>—or, Aboriginalist—vein, constructing ourselves in *opposition* to the lower-class, racial/ethnic and female Other. Not paying heed to Indigenous views of the world would be equivalent to the controlled silencing Aborigines have been subject to for over two centuries of white domination, which in turn has served to confirm Western subjectivity.

Thirdly, in selecting four writers and their work, four literal and literary *corpi*<sup>69</sup> in which—from a Western perspective—the uncanny powerfully obtains, I have deemed it necessary to address the case of Mudrooroo, whose authentication as an Indigenous writer became fatally troublesome two decades ago. While his voice in the Australian literary and academic firmament has been virtually silenced as a result of the current politics of the Indigenous Australian body, his presence in this study is appropriate, since the notion of inauthenticity he incarnates was one of the most salient manifestations of the uncanny in Australian identitarian territory, and arguably still nowadays. Indeed, there is a certain obsession with fraud and frauds in Australian literature, as in the fiction of Peter Carey,<sup>70</sup> the media-hyped questioning of the Indigeneity of such authors as Archie Weller and Roberta Sykes, and the intentional identity frauds of Wanda Koolmatrie and B. Wongar.<sup>71</sup> Mudrooroo's ostracization on both sides of the racial divide highlights the complex, apparently contradictory nature of an emancipatory politics of Indigeneity that aims to do away with the repressive consequences of racial division while building on a sense of racial difference to uphold its own empowerment. It appears fair to say that Mudrooroo's case is disturbingly caught between the political realities imposed by the existence of a racial divide and the ideal of overcoming such a division. That is to say, there is an uneasy tension between, on the one hand, the need for a politics of the Indigenous body in the service of Indigenous agency expressed through self-definition

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<sup>68</sup> See Edward Said's seminal study *Orientalism* for an analysis of the construction of the Western Self in opposition to the ethnic Other.

<sup>69</sup> I play on *corpus* (Lat.) = physical body, as well as on *corpus* (Eng.) = literary body of work by an author.

<sup>70</sup> See, for instance, his *My Life as a Fake* (Random House Australia, 2003) and *Theft: A Love Story* (Random House Australia, 2006).

<sup>71</sup> Penny van Toorn, "Indigenous texts and narratives," in *The Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature*, ed. Elizabeth Webby (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000): 41–44.

and self-determination, and, on the other, a call for a postmodern shift away from the traditional biological fixing of identity in terms of race, gender, and class toward an awareness of its cultural articulation along these three axes, which presents identities as an effect of performance rather than as an immanent essence bound by originality and authenticity.

This tension engages with the parameters of Indigeneity in the current constellation of Australian society. The recovery of Indigeneity cannot be successfully implemented without an openness of definition that goes against the persisting notion of Indigenous authenticity in Australian mainstream thinking. This is all the more necessary as such a notion of authenticity also underpins the allegedly progressive, emancipatory native title legislation and policies of multiculturalism. Thus, the Indigenous critic Philip Morrissey argues for the need

to defend the notion of an open and liberal Aboriginality, and valorise those articulations of Aboriginality that would be in danger of being shut down or diminished by the reintroduction of authentic/inauthentic discourses into Aboriginal cultural criticism [...] The problem with the policing and maintenance of acceptable cultural and political positions is that *those positions become reified and the critical debate necessary for a community of modernity is stifled.*<sup>72</sup>

Openness of definition beyond strictly biological notions of race would allow the Indigenous reinscription of the vast amount of mixed offspring resulting from the Stolen Generations by accepting their articulation of identity as just another manifestation of Indigeneity induced by recent historical circumstances.

This notwithstanding, Mudrooroo remains a borderline case of non/Indigeneity whose lived Indigenous experience is offset by a lack of Indigenous 'blood', and troubled by the accusation that he may have hidden his non-Indigenous ancestry to further his interests. Thus, he

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<sup>72</sup> Philip Morrissey, "Aboriginality and corporatism" (1998), in *Blacklines: Contemporary Critical Writing by Indigenous Australians*, ed. Michèle Grossman (Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne UP, 2003): 52–53 (emphasis added). He reacted to Mudrooroo's "disquieting and exclusionary" views on Aboriginality professed in the ABC's literature program *Between the Lines* in 1995.

has become a showcase for the tensions involved in a prevailing self-definition of Indigeneity that uncomfortably attempts to straddle the gap between inclusiveness and the need to maintain clear borders of group membership for an effective politics of Indigenous empowerment within the existing mainstream legal and political framework.<sup>73</sup> While vital experience and commitment are indeed recognized as important elements of Indigeneity, it appears that Indigenous Australia cannot afford *not* to insist upon the essentialist notion of genetic ancestry for its community members in order to authorize its rights (and de-authorize those of others) within a larger society whose laws and policies are conditioned by a deterministic history of racial oppression and genocide.<sup>74</sup> Thus, a *strategic*, non-essentialist employment of an Indigenous politics of the body is—perhaps contradictorily—to be understood as a configuration of identity in which genetic authenticity and lived Indigenous experience must balance. Discomforting exclusions may obtain if either of these fails to manifest itself.

Acknowledging both the reality of wo/man's geographical, cultural, and biological situatedness and the need to overcome its limitations, I therefore aim to trace reinscriptions of race, class, and gender in the

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<sup>73</sup> See van Toorn, "Indigenous texts and narratives," 42. For example, whereas Mudrooroo's older brother claims, "If you were a coloured kid or an Aboriginal kid, you all sat in the same bench. These experiences make you a Nyoongah," the local Dumbartung Aboriginal Corporation's manager, Robert Eggington, insists upon Aboriginal protocols of identification to sift out illegitimate users of "resources earmarked for [the Aboriginal] community."

<sup>74</sup> See *Genocide and Settler Society: Frontier Violence and Stolen Indigenous Children in Australian History*, ed. Dirk A. Moses (2004; Oxford & New York: Berghahn, 2005) for a comprehensive discussion of the term genocide and its application to the Aboriginal plight in Australia, especially pp. 3–48. Genocide has been a controversial term in its Australian application, as varying state policies of different periods may not tightly fit the official UN definition of the *intentional* destruction of (part of) a racial, ethnic, national or religious group (Moses, *Genocide and Settler Society*, 23). From competing perspectives rival terms such as holocaust, extermination, cultural genocide or extinction have also been used to describe the impact of almost two and a half centuries of colonization on the Indigenous Australian peoples; I will maintain the term genocide in line with the Indigenous law expert Larissa Berendt's finding that "the political posturing and semantic debates do nothing to dispel the feeling Indigenous people have that [genocide] is the word that adequately describes our experience as colonized people." Berendt, "Genocide: The Distance Between Law and Life," *Aboriginal History* 25 (2001): 132.

Australian land/textscape through the fiction of some contemporary authors who may write from a complex, often contested background of Indigenous belonging. I also aim to consider the uncanny effects this provokes in terms of performance and articulation as well as authentication and/or legitimation. Western forms of knowledge utilize writing as their main means of transmission, unlike Indigenous Australian culture, which prioritizes the oral. Thus, I will pay special attention to the reappropriation and reconfiguration of Western literary genres in the articulation of a written Indigenous discourse in Australian literature. The textual interface this creates is a postcolonizing kind of dreaming narrative which I shall call *Aboriginal Reality* to refer to a literature that defamiliarizes Western understanding of form and content, and deals with Indigenous Australian narrative on its own, incommensurable terms. In doing so, I follow Alexis Wright, who has spoken of Aboriginal Reality as a hybrid genre<sup>75</sup> to some extent beyond white understanding and therefore uncanny to Western, but not to Indigenous Australian, perceptions, and whose incommensurability cannot be assimilated by the white I/eye. As Alison Ravenscroft writes succinctly,

If by reading we mean an act of making sense, of giving meaning to a text, of finding semantic consistency, then what does the non-Indigenous subject do if an Indigenous-signed text resists this meaning-making? Can we go further and ask if prevailing reading practices are a modern repetition of the relations of colonialism where a coloniser-settler encounters an Indigenous subject as if the self-same?<sup>76</sup>

In order to establish an interpretive framework, I shall explore the different concepts that have appeared throughout this introduction in a methodological chapter that looks at the uncanny and its postcolonizing manifestations. From there on I shall narrow my inquiry down to Australian multiculturalism and its recent developments, which have

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<sup>75</sup> As the Indigenous scholar, poet, and writer Jeanine Leane commented during a presentation at the 2013 ASAL congress at Sturt University, NSW, which I attended.

<sup>76</sup> Alison Ravenscroft, *The Postcolonial Eye: White Australian Desire and the Visual Field of Race* (Farnham & Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2012): 19.

increasingly contributed to unsettling notions of Australian identity in a typically postcolonizing move that I will define as ‘uncanny’. Additionally, I will draw attention to the fact that such unsettlement is not restricted to racial and ethnic redefinitions alone but maps across class and gender as well. Such interplay was already inherent in the colonial context, of which Ania Loomba says:

The fear of cultural and racial pollution prompts the most hysterical dogmas about racial difference and sexual behaviours because it suggests the instability of ‘race’ as a category. Sexuality is thus a means for the maintenance or erosion of racial difference. Women on both sides of the colonial divide demarcate both the innermost sanctums of race, culture and nation, as well as the porous frontiers through which these are penetrated. Their relationship to colonial discourses is mediated through this double positioning. These various ways of positioning and erasing women in colonial writings indicate *the intricate overlaps between colonial and sexual domination*.<sup>77</sup>

Loomba concludes that “race, gender and sexuality [...] develop in each other’s crucible” while also interacting and overlapping with issues of class.<sup>78</sup> Conversely, the opening up of the race binary should automatically have its effects in the terrains of class and gender.

I shall close Chapter 1 with a discussion of the reappropriation and adaptation of the European Fantastic and Gothic as well as South-American Magical Realism by Indigenous writers in their attempts to articulate postcolonial notions of self across race, class, and gender. In doing so, I aim to show how contemporary Indigenous Australian writing may naturally develop toward a postcolonizing configuration of the uncanny as it articulates the return of the repressed as the remanifestation of the Aboriginal sacred. The idiosyncrasy of such a return can be seen in light of Rosemary Jackson’s argument regarding the Fantastic mode in Western literature, under which the Gothic and Magical Realism may be subsumed:

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<sup>77</sup> Ania Loomba, *Colonialism–Postcolonialism* (London: Routledge, 1998): 159, emphasis added.

<sup>78</sup> Loomba, *Colonialism–Postcolonialism*, 172.

theology and psychology function in similar ways, to explain otherness. They have become *substitutions for the sacred*, or, as [Fredric] Jameson writes, strategic secular reinventions of it. Fantasy shifts from one 'explanation' of otherness to another in the course of its history. It moves from supernaturalism and magic to theology and science to categorize or define otherness. Freud's theories of the Unconscious are one means of explaining, or rationalizing, this realm.<sup>79</sup>

Jackson argues that monotheistic religion and scientific discourse have superseded so-called 'primitive' beliefs so as to explain difference in the course of Western civilization, whereas developments in Indigenous literature validate the recovery of these. In its articulation of the return rather than the substitution of the Aboriginal sacred or Dreaming,<sup>80</sup> the configuration of Aboriginal Reality can be identified as operating beyond the parameters of the Fantastic, Gothic, and Magical Realism.

In subsequent chapters, I will discuss how the general output of Indigenous-authored novels increasingly contributes to the creation of an idiosyncratic, Indigenous Australian literary genre. In order to do so, I will trace manifestations of the postcolonizing uncanny in the work of two male and two female authors who have written from an Indigenous point of view. From a political angle, I will investigate how these manifestations are inscribed in an agenda of rewriting the race, class, and gender parameters of Australianness from the 1980s onwards. This period is marked by the Bicentennial celebrations, the 'euphoria' of native title and Aborigine-inclusive multiculturalism, a stubborn conservative backlash in politics topped off by the intervention of remote Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory, the federal apology for past grief caused to the Stolen Generations victims, and now

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<sup>79</sup> Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (New York: Methuen, 1981): 158, emphasis added. She quotes from Fredric Jameson, "Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre," *New Literary History* 7.1 (Autumn 1975): 145.

<sup>80</sup> 'The Dreaming' or 'Dreamtime' is the English denomination for the universe of Aboriginal customs and beliefs that signals the ongoing link of their mythical past with their present and future. On such a view, 'intangible spirituality' and 'tangible reality' are inseparable elements of life.



the call for meaningful recognition in the Constitution as expressed in the Uluru Statement from the Heart.

Chapter 2 focusses on Sally Morgan's *My Place* (1987), a fictionalized polyphonic auto/biography which moves toward Aboriginal Reality by introducing Gothic, Magical-Realist, oral, and Dreaming elements. The novel spans three generations and explores the recovery of hidden Indigenous roots by a young woman of part-Indigenous descent, living in the outskirts of Perth. Published just before the Bicentennial,<sup>81</sup> *My Place* marked a new era in Australian literature, in that it foregrounded the autobiographical genre of Indigenous life writing for mainstream sensibilities. Conditioned as the Bicentennial was by the moment of invasion of Australia rather than its independence from Britain, its celebration signalled "an acute anxiety at the core of the national self-image" and "an obsession with the issue of legitimacy," which would increasingly center on the sense of guilt about the treatment of the original owners of the land, the Indigenous peoples.<sup>82</sup> Morgan's auto/biography would acquire a strategic place within mainstream attempts to come to terms with this discomfiting past and thus also raise questions as to her inscription of her own Indigeneity.

Chapter 3 is dedicated to the work of Colin Johnson, better known as Mudrooroo, a male author who stands out for a long-standing and influential commitment to the Indigenous cause in activism, theoretical work, poetry, and fiction. This notwithstanding, his Indigenous identity and entitlement to speak on behalf of the Indigenous community have been seriously questioned over the last three decades. This de-authorization is caused by the vexed account of his biological descent, and compounded by his management of 'the truth' and his masculinist politics of race and gender, so that what many a critic considers his misogynist criticism of Sally Morgan's auto/biography fed back into his identity trouble. How his turbulent relationship with race and gender (and hence class) has affected the articulation of identity issues in his latest fiction, which I aim to trace in an analysis of *Maban Reality* in his fiction, his proposal for a genre that interweaves elements of Magical

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<sup>81</sup> The Bicentennial was the special two-centenary version of Australia Day, a public holiday on 26 January each year. Both the Bicentennial and Australia Day are, nowadays, highly disputed celebrations, the latter also being known as "Invasion Day", "Shame Day" and "Sorrow Day" among Aborigines.

<sup>82</sup> Hodge & Mishra, *Dark Side of the Dream*, ix-x.

Realism, Fantasy, the Gothic, and Dreaming narrative. Maban Reality would start taking shape in *Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World* (1983), and develop fully in a series of four novels written between 1991 and 2000.<sup>83</sup> The quintet proposes a peculiar, postcolonizing form of life writing and a troubled cocktail of genres.

In Chapter 4, uprootedness vs belonging is also at issue in the work of Kim Scott. This male author from Morgan's and Mudrooroo's native Western Australia mixes Magical Realism, the Gothic, and the Dreaming into an instance of Aboriginal Reality so as to address the process of re/defining Indigeneity. Scott's *True Country* (1993) may be described as a male reconfiguration of the genre of Indigenous life writing that *My Place* popularized among so many women writers, while *Benang* (1999) brings into profile the racist contradictions in the policies of the Stolen Generations and interracial sexual relations and marriage. The latter novel, finished under PM John Howard's conservative rule and co-winner of the prestigious Miles Franklin Literary Award in 2000,<sup>84</sup> constitutes another step toward the configuration of Aboriginal Reality as an independent Indigenous Australian literary genre. It criticizes the politics of absorption and assimilation by centering on "the first white man born"<sup>85</sup> in a part-Indigenous family, tying the plight of the Stolen Generations in to the eugenic misdeeds of Augustus O. Neville, the highest authority in Indigenous affairs in Western Australia between 1915 and 1940.<sup>86</sup> His 2010 Miles Franklin winning novel *That Deadman Dance* completes Scott's development of fiction as a postcolonizing expression of Indigenous sovereignty of the mind by reimagining first-contact history from an Indigenous, Nyoongar perspective, a Dreaming Narrative for new times that rewrites Australianness.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* (1991); *The Undying* (1998); *Underground* (1999); *The Promised Land* (2000).

<sup>84</sup> Together with the mainstream author Thea Astley's *Drylands* (1999).

<sup>85</sup> Kim Scott, *Benang* (1999; New Delhi: Penguin India, 2003): 10.

<sup>86</sup> See Ellinghaus, "Absorbing the 'Aboriginal Problem,'" 190. Ellinghaus makes special mention of Scott's *Benang* "for a fictional treatment of the effect of Neville's policies on Western Australian Aboriginal people."

<sup>87</sup> Scott's latest novel, *Taboo*, offers for the first time a female protagonist and focuses on the transgenerational trauma connected to an Indigenous massacre site in his

Chapter 5 concentrates on the Northern Queensland author Alexis Wright, whose *Plains of Promise* (1997) also comments on the genre of Indigenous life writing and represents what critics generally see as a highly-personal, Australian form of Magical Realism.<sup>88</sup> Wright's explosion of the Western form of the realist novel so as to accommodate an Indigenous world of experience takes shape around the struggle of three generations of women of mixed Indigenous descent against their uprootedness in class, racial, and gender terms. Born of the author's disappointment with mainstream politics, it may be read as a troubling reply to the notion of reconciliation with an Indigenous past along matrilineal lines proffered in Sally Morgan's *My Place*. It also reads as an answer to Mudrooroo's proposal of the literary genre of Maban Reality, developed in his theoretical work and given a rather masculinist shape in his *Master* series. Finally, it develops the incorporation of the Dreaming and the issue of hybridism in the Stolen Generations, which Kim Scott's award-winning *Benang* also explores. In the manner with which it rewrites the uncanny interface of the Indigenous and non-Indigenous worlds, *Plains of Promise* could be more successfully understood as an instance of Aboriginal Reality than as Magical Realism.

I will continue my discussion with Alexis Wright's award-winning novel *Carpentaria* (2006), which I believe is a culmination of the configuration of the hybrid yet 'authentically-Indigenous' Australian literary genre of Aboriginal Reality. It refashions the archetypal Western epic along the parameters of the Indigenous storytelling tradition to confer a sense of heroism and collective identity building on the Indigenous community. Whether intended or not, in configuring an empowering Indigenous epic, *Carpentaria* takes issue with Xavier Herbert's epic vision of the white settlement of Northern Queensland in *Capricornia*, written some seventy years earlier. Moreover, it counters

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tribal country in the south of Western Australia. Published in 2017, it could not be included in this study for reasons of space and time.

<sup>88</sup> For example, Jenny Pausacker in the Melbourne *Age* (reprinted on the UQP 1998 edition backcover of *Plains of Promise*). However, Wright's latest publication is a biography on the Aboriginal activist Tracker Tilmouth (2017) and therefore non-fiction—insofar as the terms 'fiction' and 'non-fiction' are meaningful in an Aboriginal perception of narrative, story, and history. Cf. Stephen Muecke, *Textual Spaces: Aboriginality and Cultural Studies* (Kensington: New South Wales UP, 1992): 65–66.

the troubling, disempowering Gothic inscription of Indigeneity taking over the end of Mudrooroo's *Master* series, which bodes little good for the Indigenous future. Lastly, it follows up on Scott's engagement with the Indigenous community and land; solving Morgan's struggle with the tension between the individual and the communal in favor of the latter, *Carpentaria* promotes a wholesome inscription of Indigeneity in collective belonging to country. Giving primacy to the Dreaming over Magical-Realist and Gothic features, it exemplifies the Indigenous Australian effort to constitute a recognizably 'authentic' storytelling tradition in writing. In *Carpentaria*, the genre of Aboriginal Reality necessarily hybridizes Western and Indigenous form and content but stands out as a new and independent form of Indigenous Australian literary art. As my discussion of Wright's next and most recent novel aims to show, *The Swan Book* (2013) revisits the themes, modes, and structures of her previous fiction and gives consistency to her literary development and agenda.

Accordingly, my concluding chapter aims to argue for Indigenous reality as a literary genre whose narrative potential activates the uncanny in various ways: it appropriates and adapts Western literary forms and content within an Indigenous Australian framework of storymaking and telling; it seeks to wrest Indigeneity free from essentialist visions of race, class, and gender; it establishes an Indigenous sovereignty of the mind on grounds of cultural incommensurability as a literary form of native title; and it necessarily rewrites the Australian multiculturalist agenda by haunting its neo-assimilationist traits. A prime tool in the postcolonizing take on identity formation in the present study is the unpacking of the Freudian uncanny in the realm of non-signification. In order to establish the uncanny's postcolonizing potential I will address Hélène Cixous' psychoanalytical thought as well as the theoretical work of Homi Bhabha, Slavoj Žižek, Jacques Derrida, and Judith Butler, among others. Through their analyses, the uncanny opens up the categories of race/ethnicity, class, and gender to multiple shifting readings and beckons toward performativity rather than fixity of identity.

# 1

## Kenning the Uncanny

There may well be spaces in Australia that could be described as postcolonial but these are not spaces inhabited by Indigenous people.<sup>1</sup>

This methodological chapter aims to develop an interlinked socio-historical literary framework so as to analyze literal and literary manifestations of the Indigenous corpus in contemporary Australia. This should form the groundwork for a discussion of the ways in which the literary production of Sally Morgan, Mudrooroo, Kim Scott, and Alexis Wright contests the traditional project of nation and identity building by the Australian establishment as well as feeding into reconfigurations of the racialized, classist, and gendered parameters of Australian multiculturalism. Such an analysis inevitably takes us back to stereotypical representations of Australianness: how, traditionally, these have either excluded the Aborigine or have reincorporated the Indigenous element as folklore, and how reinscriptions, rearticulations, and reauthorizations of race, class, and gender inevitably draw on manifestations of the uncanny. Thus, this chapter looks at the uncanny as a tool in articulating difference from a decolonizing literary perspective, starting out with a critical assessment of Freud's groundwork on the concept, and building toward its psycho-social and cultural manifestations in postcolonial society.

### Gendering the Uncanny

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<sup>1</sup> Aileen Moreton-Robinson, "I Still Call Australia Home," 30.

Sigmund Freud's essay "Das Unheimliche" (tr. as "The Uncanny"), published in 1919, should be understood in its cultural, geographical, and historical situatedness: Late Empire and the First World War as the crisis of European modernity. Freud's interest in the uncanny was fueled by the alienating anguish expressed in art in the aftermath of devastating armed conflict in the war trenches. Freud's semantic analysis of the uncanny establishes that "*heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*." Once he had established that the uncanny encompasses all that "ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light,"<sup>2</sup> Freud develops the term psychoanalytically using his disciple Otto Rank's work on the double, as nothing is more homely and yet *un*-homely and frightening than an alter-ego (234).<sup>3</sup> Glossed as the look-alike in appearance/behavior or "the uncanny harbinger of death" (a mirror image, shadow or guardian spirit) (234–235), the double constitutes an uncanny metaphor for our capacity of self-observation, self-criticism, and self-censorship. Still following Freud, the uncanny is therefore connected to the repression of certain experiences and emotions, often in childhood, which transform into a disquieting anxiety when they finally resurface. It is connected to "nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression," and occurs "when primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed" (241, 249). Thus, Freud locates the unsettling quality of the concept as *the familiar turning strange*.

Freud highlights the literary as a prime source for the uncanny, provided writers "move into the world of common reality" with their fiction. Indeed, the disquieting effect perceived is related to the

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<sup>2</sup> Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. & tr. James Strachey, vol. 17 ("Das Unheimliche," 1919; London: Hogarth, 1953): 220–226. Further page references are in the main text.

<sup>3</sup> Otto Rank was most valued by Freud for his contributions to the development of psychoanalysis; he wrote a study on the double in the field of the arts (*Der Doppelgänger*) in 1914, which Freud refers to in "The Uncanny" (see p. 234 and elsewhere), although it was not published until 1925.

plausibility of the fictional event. An author may heighten the uncanny effect by keeping readers “in the dark for a long time about the precise nature of the presuppositions on which the world he writes about is based” (249–251). Thus, postcolonial worlds described in literary fiction may be taken as plausible yet unfathomable other universes which release disquieting effects: redefinitions of the Western worldview may occur from the margins, and the uncanny, as a fringe concept, naturally ties in with such an agenda.

Hélène Cixous’ feminist critique of Freud’s masculinist interpretation of the uncanny links its lack of prototypicality to non-representation. As she points out,

the concept is without nucleus: the *Unheimliche* presents itself, first of all, only on the fringe of something else. Freud relates it to other concepts which resemble it (fright, fear, anguish): it is a unit of the “family” but it is not really a member of the family [...] The indefiniteness is part and parcel of the “concept”.<sup>4</sup>

She sees in Freud’s inquiry an obsession for “*something absolutely new* [...] which, nevertheless, cannot be ‘found’ there but which [...] slips into this disturbing domain.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, Cixous takes issue with Freud’s analysis of E.T.A. Hoffmann’s Sand-Man tale,<sup>6</sup> which is instrumental in the Viennese psychoanalyst’s view of the uncanny.

This disquieting story about the repetitive resurgence of a disturbing childhood memory, which centers on an imaginary haunting character reputed to tear out children’s eyes, is interpreted by Freud in oedipal terms favoring the patriarchal. As Oedipus had been figuratively blind about the true, incestuous nature of the love

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<sup>4</sup> Hélène Cixous, “Fiction and its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud’s Das Unheimliche (The ‘uncanny’),” *New Literary History* 7.3 (Spring 1976): 528.

<sup>5</sup> Cixous, “Fiction and its Phantoms,” 531.

<sup>6</sup> See Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny,” 233. Freud calls E.T.A. Hoffmann “the unrivalled master of the uncanny in literature.” Hoffmann lived from 1776 to 1822. His fiction, which combined the grotesque and the supernatural with psychological realism, was very influential on the German Romantic movement. Further page references are in the main text.

and death triangle he was involved in, his punishment for transgressing the incest taboo aptly translates into a physical loss of sight. The latter, in Freud's words, is only "a mitigated form of the punishment of castration—the only punishment that was adequate for him by the *lex talionis*" (231). In Hoffmann's tale, several mother figures appear whom its protagonist Nathaniel is in love with—notably the uncanny automaton Olympia—but projections of the Sand-Man, the irascible alter ego of the otherwise gentle father, consequently block the consummation of what Freud identifies as Nathaniel's incestuous wishes (230). Nathaniel ends up killing the father figure and punishes himself by hurling himself to his own end; through his death, the oedipal sequence turns from virtual to factual blindness, and thus to castration.

But, as Cixous observes, Freud highlights the role of the Sand-Man (the male principle) and de-emphasizes the role of Olympia (the female principle) in the production of the story's uncanny effect.<sup>7</sup> Thus, Cixous concludes that Freud is the victim of his own gender conditioning: in his insistence on rationalizing Nathaniel's behavior: his "entire analysis of the *Unheimliche* is characterized [...] by [his] resistance to castration and its effectuality" (535). What Freud's analysis presents as the "'surprising story' [...] of the birth and evolution of the double, the product and hiding-place of castration" in fact obscures that "as 'an anticipatory sign' the uncanny alludes to the death pulse" (538–539).

Cixous takes the uncanny into the realm of sexual signification, but only to relinquish and blur gender binaries in the final analysis. The *Heimliche* as the homely links to the maternal and the *Unheimliche* to the paternal principle, but their ambiguous circulation through each other evoke "the figure of the androgyne. The word joins itself, again, and the *Heimliche* and *Unheimliche* pair off" (530). While this merger suggests the re/productive principle embodied in 'little death', this sexual metaphor also explains "why [...] the maternal landscape, the *heimisch*, and the familiar become so disquieting." Paradoxically, the obliteration of separations, barriers, and limits in the realization of our desires presupposes death:

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<sup>7</sup> Cixous, "Fiction and its Phantoms," 533. Further page references are in the main text.



All of that which overcomes, shortens, economizes, and assures satisfaction appears to affirm the life forces. All of that has another face turned toward death which *is* the *detour* of life. The abbreviating effect which affirms life asserts death. (544–545)

In other words, death blurs boundaries and life re/creates itself in death's non-signification.

This gender critique locates the uncanny as the harbinger of death, because “as a *changing* sign, [the uncanny] passes from the affirmation of survival to the announcement of death.” At the same time, it produces the figure of the undead double as a “ghostly figure of nonfulfillment and repression [...] the doll [i.e. Olympia] that is neither dead nor alive” (539–540). This is so because, according to Cixous, the uncanny represents “the fiction of our relationship to death, concretized by the spectre in literature”:

The relationship to death reveals *the highest degree* of the *Unheimliche*. There is nothing more notorious and uncanny to our thought than mortality [...] Why would death have this power? Because of its alliance with scientific uncertainty and primitive thought. ‘Death’ does not have any form in life. Our unconscious makes no place for the representation of our mortality. (542–543)

And herein resides the uncanny's elusive *newness*: its conceptual liminality opens up into the broad sway of nonsignification—beyond representation, it becomes the sign that does not signify. Contradictorily, the literary representation of the uncanny, the specter, is a most tangible non-sign: ghosts do not exist outside fiction, but as fiction is just “another form of reality” (546), they touch upon the real and mediate between representation and non-representation. Thus,

what is intolerable is that the Ghost erases the limit which exists between the two states, neither alive nor dead [...] The strange power of death moves in the realm of life as the

*Unheimliche* in the *Heimliche*, as the void fills up the lack.  
(543)

Cixous elaborates on Freud's view of literature as well: she understands fiction as undeniably and ambiguously linked to reality as the uncanny to the homely, as death to life: "[fiction] is not unreal; it is the 'fictional reality' and the vibration of reality. The *Unheimliche* in fiction overflows and comprises the *Unheimliche* of real life." What is more, in her view, it is literature itself that represents the uncanny:

The true secret of fiction rests somewhere else. Fiction, through the invention of *new* forms of *Unheimliche*, is *the very strange thing* [...] Neither real not fictitious, 'fiction' is [...] an anticipation of *nonrepresentation*, a doll, a hybrid body composed of language and silence that [...] invents doubles, and death. (547–548, emphasis added).

Fiction, then, is a realm of nonsignification in which nothing is fixed, a repository of possibilities as yet unrealized that may therefore question as well as redefine and alter factual realities—not unlike Alan Sinfield's notion of literature as a "particularising pattern laid across the grid of (changing) social possibilities."<sup>8</sup>

### **Decolonizing the Uncanny**

The death of colonialism may give way to postcolonial constructs that, writing back from the margins, can help to redefine racial/ethnic realities and beyond. However, whereas the colonial is a clearly delineated concept, the postcolonial is imprecise, not opposing itself firmly to the colonial, as Ella Shohat argues. It ambiguously negotiates between the meanings of *post* as *beyond* and *after*, with shifting references to intellectual currents (postmodernism, poststructuralism, etc.) and to historical chronologies (postwar, post-independence, etc.), with a blurring

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<sup>8</sup> Alan Sinfield, "Introduction," *Society and Literature 1945–1970*, ed. Sinfield (London: Methuen, 1983): 3–4.

effect on differential spatio-temporalities, and with an undermining of anti-neocolonial agencies:

The term 'post-colonial' carries with it the implication that colonialism is now a matter of the past, undermining colonialism's economic, political, and cultural-deformative traces in the present. The 'post-colonial' inadvertently glosses over the fact that global hegemony, even in the post-cold war era, persists in forms other than overt colonial rule. As a signifier of a new historical epoch, the term 'post-colonial' [...] comes equipped with little evocation of contemporary power relations.<sup>9</sup>

As the postcolonial is never a fully hyphenated *post*-colonial, indicative of the complete demise of colonialism, the term's ambiguity firmly links itself to manifestations of the uncanny, turning the latter into both a signpost and a tool in the process of rewriting national identities.

The uncanny, then, is part and parcel of the work of distinguished critics and theorists writing on postcolonial identity building. Edward Said's groundbreaking study in the field of postcolonialism, *Orientalism* (1978), draws the literary into the political:

Too often literature and culture are presumed to be politically, even historically innocent [...] and certainly my study of *Orientalism* has convinced me [...] that society and literary culture can only be understood and studied together.<sup>10</sup>

Applying a Foucauldian approach, Said's main contention is that the nineteenth- and twentieth-century European academic practice of studying Oriental cultures developed as a colonial discourse aimed at assimilating cultural difference to the colonizer's framework of

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<sup>9</sup> Ellen Shohat, "Notes on the 'Post-Colonial'," *Social Text* 31–32 (1992): 101–105.

<sup>10</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (1978; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995): 27. Further page references are in the main text.

knowledge so as to control the newly conquered domains. What he denominates as Orientalism expresses “a certain *will* or *intention* to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world” which still survives in postcolonial times (12). Essentially, Said’s thesis is that a national identity is always the product of its relationship with other cultures, in which the definition of Self against Other is negotiated in terms of power:

the development and maintenance of every culture require the existence of another different and competing *alter ego*. The construction of identity [...] involves establishing opposites and ‘others’ whose actuality is always subject to the continuous interpretation and re-interpretation of their differences from ‘us’. Each age and society recreates its ‘Others’. Far from a static thing then, identity of self or of ‘other’ is a much worked-over historical, social, intellectual, and political process that takes place as a contest involving individuals and institutions in all societies. (332)

While Said’s geocultural focus on the Near and Middle East remains appropriate for an analysis of the identity problems encountered in the contemporary European firmament, the scope of his study has also been successfully expanded to embrace Australia, as Hodge and Mishra’s coining of ‘aboriginalism’ evidences.<sup>11</sup> Following Said’s line of thought, one may claim that universalist efforts to incorporate entirely different fields of experience are bound to fail, because they do not admit different knowledge on equal terms—that is to say, within the other’s frame of interpretation. When eventually such knowledge releases itself into its own cultural specificity, it becomes uncanny to the Western mind, defamiliarizing known models of interpretation.

Said’s use of the double or alter ego allows us to deconstruct Freud’s theory of incest in racial-ethnic terms via the uncanny. Freud’s *Totem and Taboo* (1918) is an exemplary piece of aboriginalist scholarship based on (post-)Victorian anthropological

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<sup>11</sup> Bob Hodge & Vijay Mishra, *Dark Side of the Dream*, 27–30.

descriptions of the Indigenous Australians. The volume's first essay, "The Savage's Fear of Incest," reveals Freud's racially deterministic agenda, which places Indigenous Australians at the abject bottom of human development:

We can [...] judge the so-called savage and semi-savage races; their psychic life assumes a peculiar interest for us, for we can recognize in their psychic life a well-preserved, early stage of our own development [...] For outer as well as inner reasons, I am choosing for this comparison those tribes which have been described by ethnographers as being *most backward and wretched*: the aborigines of the youngest continent, namely Australia: whose fauna has also preserved for us so much that is archaic and no longer to be found elsewhere.<sup>12</sup>

Freud's interest in totemism and taboos among Indigenous Australians feeds into a universal theory of civilization which aims to illuminate from a pristine Antipodean perspective what is presumably controlled, obscured, and rendered unfathomable in Western society—the incest wish:

Psychoanalysis has taught us that the first object selection of the boy is of an incestuous nature and that it is directed to the forbidden objects, the mother and the sister; psychoanalysis has taught us also the methods through which the maturing individual frees himself from these incestuous attractions. The neurotic, however, regularly presents to us a piece of psychic infantilism; he has either not been able to free himself from the childlike conditions of psychosexuality, or else has

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<sup>12</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo, Resemblances Between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*, tr. A.A. Brill (*Totem und Tabu: Einige Übereinstimmungen im Seelenleben der Wilden und der Neurotiker*, 1913, tr. 1918; Mineola NY: Dover, 1998): 1, emphasis added. Further page references are in the main text. The choice of the term "youngest continent" contradicts the argument on the archaic and backwardness developed in the passage quoted; 'young' must undoubtedly refer to Australia's recent 'discovery' by European civilization, an ethnocentrism of sorts underscored by the contrasted longevity of Aboriginal cultures.

returned to them (inhibited development and regression).  
(15)<sup>13</sup>

Freud presents the survival of the incest wish as a serious lack of psycho-social maturity and extrapolates the degree to which societies have interiorized and repressed this wish into a universal ranking of civilization. In so-called 'primitive' cultures, such as that of the Indigenous Australians, the law, the sacred, the unclean, and fear are articulated through totemism and taboos on incestuous conduct. Marriage among clan members belonging to the same totem is normally forbidden (14), and endogamy becomes defined as sexual intercourse with members of one's totemic kin, hence as incest, because "everybody descended from the same totem is consanguinous; that is, of one family; and in this family the most distant grades of relationship are recognized as an absolute obstacle to sexual union" (4). Freud highlights the fact that, in the case of Indigenous people, violation of the incest taboo was, at the time he was writing, punishable by death at the hands of the entire clan (5). Freud appropriates contemporary anthropological knowledge in the essay's conclusion by juxtaposing it with his understanding of white male middle-class psychology. It is revealing that Freud should conclude that repression of the incest wish undergirds the supposedly deepest expressions of high Western art, such as fiction and poetry, making such repression central to any manifestation of human culture and so allowing a hierarchization from the savage to the civilized, working along the binaries of skin color, violence, and morality:

This discovery of the significance of incest for the neurosis naturally meets with the most general incredulity on the part of the grown-up, normal man; a similar rejection will also meet the researches of Otto Rank, which show in even larger scope to what extent the incest theme stands in the center of

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<sup>13</sup> In psychiatry, neurosis is defined as "mild forms of mental disorder" that cause anxiety but do not necessarily prevent normal functioning in daily life. The term is no longer in use in psychiatric diagnosis (adapted from *Columbia Electronic Dictionary*, Cambridge UP, 2005. <http://columbia.thefreedictionary.com/>).

poetical interest and how it forms the material of poetry in countless variations and distortions. We are forced to believe that such a rejection is above all the product of deep aversion to his former incest wishes, which have since succumbed to repression. It is therefore of importance to us to be able to show that man's incest wishes, which later are destined to become unconscious, are still felt to be dangerous by savage races who consider them worthy of the most severe defensive measures. (15)

Freud's reference to Otto Rank is revealing, because the latter's investigations into the use of the double and the importance of the incest theme to literary work was to form the backbone of Freud's analysis of the uncanny.<sup>14</sup>

Importantly, Freud uses received anthropological interpretations of Indigenous Australian cultures to underpin his psychoanalytical theory of the Oedipus complex. Freud's interest in Indigenous cultures derives from a specific problematic he encountered in his Viennese psychiatric practice, when, in order to reach solutions, he constructed, in Orientalist ways, a 'modern' theory about the Western European psyche in opposition to 'primitive' Australia. Ultimately, he defined the European Self against the Antipodean Other by treating the management of the incest wish as the essence of all human culture and civilization:

I want to state the conclusion that the beginnings of religion, ethics society, and art meet in the Oedipus complex [...] This is in entire accord with the findings of psychoanalysis, namely, that the nucleus of all neuroses as far as our present knowledge of them goes is the Oedipus complex. It comes as a great surprise to me that these problems of *racial* psychology can be solved through a single concrete instance, such as the relation to the father. (134)

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<sup>14</sup> See Freud, "The Uncanny," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. & tr. James Strachey, vol. 17 ("Das Unheimliche," 1919; London: Hogarth, 1953): 234–235.

In doing so, Freud assigns a position of cultural 'maturity' to the West and 'immaturity' to 'primitive' Australia. In Freud's account, the Aborigines are more 'infantile' because they have not yet learnt to control their impulses and emotions: they still openly recognize, prohibit, and fear the incest wish and implement capital punishment in retaliation, whereas Westerners are supposed to have overcome/repressed such feelings in their 'normal', civilized development. In Western society the incest wish is presumably obscured but may resurface from the unconscious as neurosis when mature, 'advanced' mechanisms of control fail—hence the need for remedy by observing a 'primitive tradition' which lives the incest taboo out in the open.<sup>15</sup> By the same metaphor of immaturity, Freud relegates Indigenous Australian knowledge to an inferior position as it is incorporated into Western understandings and forms of knowing; this maneuver confirms the hegemony of eurocentric thought, which celebrates its universalist modernity against the underdeveloped primitive, thus celebrating and justifying its civilizing impulse through the constitution of Empire.

Lastly, Freud's analysis of incest in *Totem and Taboo* is profoundly androcentric: it is the boy/man who entertains the incestuous wish, while his mother and sister(s) remain the passive objects of his desire. *Totem and Taboo* fosters deconstruction not only across gender but also across race by linking the 'primitive' (the archaic, the savage, the unconscious, the repressed) to the ethnic. It is chiefly in this racialist aspect—'racial psychology'—that the structural link between oedipal blindness, castration, and death is substantiated in Freud's account, the penalty for incest among Aborigines being capital punishment.

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<sup>15</sup> See Therese M. Caiter, "The Other Side of Us: Australian National Identity and Constructions of the Aboriginal," *Australian Humanities Review* 12 (December–March 1998–99), <http://www.lib.latrobe.edu.au/AHR/archive.html> (accessed 10 July 2006). She writes in this respect that "at the very beginning of the northern European attention for so-called 'primitive' tribes of Australia there is the longing for the pristine that shaped much of European attention to indigenous cultures—as opposed to European economic interest in indigenous resources. Going back to Rousseau and the 'noble savage' [...] Europeans liked to regard their culture's shortcomings as corruption of a really quite good idea, an idea which could be found incarnated in the relationship of 'primitive' people to nature."



So, if the alternatives for individual signification also reside in the ethnic, how do they relate to larger community structures? An answer may be found in Benedict Anderson's definition of the nation as "an *imagined* political community."<sup>16</sup> He takes a step toward solving this problem by developing, along Freudian lines, a suggestive parallel between individual and national development. As people grow up they forget details of their childhood; these 'amnesias' cause estrangement and force them to fill the gaps by narration rather than remembrance, which confers a(n imagined) sense of identity on a person. Anderson holds that nations as imagined communities are built on a similar process of forgetting/narrating:

As with modern persons, so it is with nations. Awareness of being imbedded in secular, serial time, with all its implications of continuity, yet of forgetting the experience of this continuity—product of the ruptures of the late eighteenth century [the French Revolution and American War of Independence]—engenders the need for a narrative of 'identity.'<sup>17</sup>

The Australian historian Bain Attwood takes his cue from this, writing that "identities such as nationalities are both imagined and constructed; they are neither natural nor given categories, but are created by human imagination and actions." However, he also falls

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<sup>16</sup> See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983. London & New York: Verso, 1991): 6–7 (emphasis added). His full definition is noteworthy: a nation is "an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign." It is imagined because it is impossible to know all one's fellow-members of the nation so communion is imagined rather than factual; it is limited because no matter how big a nation, its boundaries are always finite though flexible; it is sovereign because the nation stems from the Enlightenment dream of human freedom; and it is imagined because it is conceptualized as "a deep, horizontal comradeship," no matter "actual inequality and exploitation." Notably, the concept of comradeship homes in on the notion of male 'mateship' in Australian identity.

<sup>17</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 204–205.

back on Said's thought by adding that "nationality is forged only by reference to an other, which it also constructs."<sup>18</sup>

Introducing *Nation and Narration*, Homi Bhabha takes the construction of Self and Other within the framework of postcolonial nationhood and identity into the terrain of estrangement, which he sees as ambivalently caught between "the *heimlich* pleasures of the hearth" and "the *unheimlich* terror of the space or race of the Other."<sup>19</sup> Bhabha elaborates on this idea in "DissemiNation," the closing essay of the above volume, analyzing how the frictional meeting of different cultures can affect and recast notions of national identity. However conflictive such encounters may be, Bhabha's account is productive in pointing out that such maneuvers are the necessary signs of a nation's openness to difference. Bhabha gives identity a territorial dimension by referring to the contact across the boundaries of what is conceived of as the physical and conceptual nation space, and claims that in postmodern times monolithic versions of identity cannot be maintained in strictly territorial 'us-and-them' conditions. In his view, postmodern identity is continually 'on the move' or displaced in its dialogue with a plurality of cultural traditions. The latter may obviously hark back to the racial/ethnic as well as class and gender differences. On the one hand, this process of shift is even more intense if one takes into account that cultural conflict takes place not only *without* but also *within* territorial boundaries, as exemplified in the cases of immigrant and Indigenous/non-Indigenous political conflict.<sup>20</sup> This clearly narrows the notion of actual and conceptual territoriality down to a local and even individual level—an inscription which is both "within the margins of the nation space and in the boundaries in-between nations and peoples."<sup>21</sup>

On the other hand, Bhabha's analysis may be cast in uncanny terms, as the building of a new national identity in terms of the

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<sup>18</sup> Bain Attwood, "Introduction" to *In the Age of Mabo*, ed. Attwood, xxiii.

<sup>19</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, "Introduction: Narrating the nation," in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990): 1–2.

<sup>20</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, "DissemiNation: Time, narrative, and the margins of the modern nation," in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990): 300.

<sup>21</sup> Bhabha, "Introduction," 4.

nation's modern concept of territoriality is, in reality, returned as atavism.<sup>22</sup> Within a postcolonial framework, the uncanny can be given a socio-political dimension when so-called 'primitive' (socio-politically repressed) notions of identity are liberated and configured as the 'modern' in the nation-state. Thus, they may lead to postcolonial estrangement and fear, haunt old colonial dichotomies, and become markers of the undoing—'death'—of essentialist notions of self. Bhabha adapts:

Freud's concept of the "narcissism of minor differences"<sup>23</sup> [...] [ to] provide[-] a way of understanding how easily that boundary that secures the cohesive limits of the western nation may imperceptibly turn into a continuous *internal* liminality that provides a place from which to speak both, and as, the minority, the exilic, the marginal, and the emergent. Freud uses the analogy of feuds that prevail between communities with adjoining territories [...] to illustrate the ambivalent identification of love and hate that binds a community together [...] So long as a firm boundary is maintained between the territories [...] the aggressivity will be projected onto the Other or the Outside.<sup>24</sup>

However, Bhabha questions whether such firm boundaries can be maintained. He sees people articulated in "an ambivalent movement between discourses of pedagogy and the performative," as there is no one-to-one relation between what nationalist discourses expect from citizens and the way they choose to act. Therefore,

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<sup>22</sup> Bhabha "DissemiNation," 300.

<sup>23</sup> See Sigmund Freud, "Civilisation and Its Discontents", in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. & tr. James Strachey, vol. 21 ("Das Unbehagen der Kultur", 1930; London: Hogarth, 1961): 114. Freud explains this notion as follows: "It is clearly not easy for man to give up the satisfaction of this inclination to aggression. They do not feel comfortable without it. The advantage which a comparatively small cultural group offers of allowing this instinct an outlet in the form of hostility against intruders is not to be despised. It is always possible to bind together a considerable number of people in love, so long as there are other people left over to receive the manifestations of their aggressiveness."

<sup>24</sup> Bhabha "DissemiNation," 300. Further page references are in the main text.

once the liminality of the nation-space is established, and its 'difference' is turned from the boundary 'outside' to its finitude 'within', the threat of cultural difference is no longer a problem of 'other' people. *It becomes a question of the otherness of the people-as-one.* (300–301, emphasis added).

Thus, Bhabha points out that there is an uncanny reversal at work in top-down conceptions of national identity, a reversal which resides in its stifling homogenization. It is an impossible oneness that is marketed, whereas the celebration of difference should be the norm. However, the attempt is to make the strange familiar, to turn "the national culture and its unisonant discourse" in the "*Heim*" of all (315). The key lies in the liminality of the nation space, which may open up spaces of alternative representations, a feature already encountered in the uncanny by Cixous. Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* serves Bhabha to make the point that the social margins are the cradle of the most "individuated" identities:

Having placed the people on the limits of the nation's narrative [there is] a lesson of history to be learnt from those [...] whose histories of marginality have been most profoundly enmeshed in the antinomies of law and order—the colonized and women. (302)

Bhabha suggests there is no recipe for "salvation, but a *strange cultural survival*" dictated by people's lives on the margins of history and language, and borders of race and gender, which allow us to translate cultural difference into a kind of solidarity (320, emphasis added). This, of course, is tantamount to the celebration of cultural plurality and difference.

In Bhabha's view, social liminality allows reconfigurations of individual and communal identities along the lines of race and gender, which in turn activates the uncanny as "a strange cultural survival." Through Freud's continued interest in the incest theme in his work with male patients from a European and exclusive middle- and upper-class background, we can understand race, gender, and class to operate in the crucible of the uncanny. But why does Bhabha not assign equal importance to the vicissitudes of the lower classes in

its social/postcolonial manifestations? Certainly, the (formerly) colonized and women could be defined as social underclasses, as issues of race and gender translate into limitations on access to the economic means of production. Indeed, according to Benedict Anderson, racism was originally inspired by class ideology, especially by “claims to divinity among rulers and to ‘blue’ or ‘white’ blood and ‘breeding’ among aristocracies,”<sup>25</sup> justifying those traditionally in control of the economy through birthright. And Gayatri Spivak points out that such class and race dichotomies translate into the imperial context by linking in with gender: “If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern female is even more in the shadow.” Moreover, in *postcolonial*—or rather: *postcolonizing* contexts—class divisions are perpetuated in an exploitative neocolonial process that maps across race and gender:

The contemporary international division of labor is a displacement of the divided field of nineteenth-century territorial capitalism. Put simply, a group of countries, generally first-world, are in the position of investing capital; another group, generally third-world, provide the field for investment, both through the comprador indigenous capitalists and through their ill-protected and shifting labor force [...] Those most separated from any possibility of an alliance among “women, prisoners, conscripted soldiers, hospital patients, and homosexuals” [...] are the females of the urban subproletariat [...] The subject of exploitation cannot know and speak the text of female exploitation [...] The woman is doubly in the shadow.<sup>26</sup>

Spivak embeds her analysis in a framework of First-/Third-World relations, in which, however, the white-settler colony Australia is ambiguously located. Its (post)colonial histories of oppression and

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<sup>25</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 150.

<sup>26</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson & Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana & Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1988): 287–288.

their uncanny entanglements may operate in a complex bind in which race and gender acquire more salience than class considerations.

### **Australianness—Whiteness and Class**

Ien Ang's discussion of white Australian reactions to the new age of mass immigration, decolonization, and globalization echoes Homi Bhabha's "*unheimlich* terror of the space or race of the Other" in arguing that white "*anxiety* is not just about race but, in a more complex and profound way, about space: the space or territory of Australia as a nation."<sup>27</sup> White anxiety arises when what is conceived of as the nation space or 'national home' becomes less familiar and therefore unhomely, which situates such fear within the psycho-social parameters of the uncanny. Benedict Anderson sees nationalism starting in the colonies rather than the metropole as part of securing the imperial project,<sup>28</sup> which says much about the amount of feeling invested in whiteness as Australianness and the uncertain status enjoyed by whiteness in liminal territories of Empire. Traditional notions of the Australian nation-state and Australian national identity are built upon a contradictory relationship with British imperialism.

Crucially, Australia's founding took place as a penal Crown colony with the arrival of the First Fleet in Sydney Cove on 26 January 1788, which initiated the invasion of the continent and its foreign peopling with a British military task force and convicts; (almost) juxtaposed to it was the moment of (quasi-)independence from the British motherland on 1 January 1901, with the founding of the Commonwealth which federated the states of Australia into a British

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<sup>27</sup> Ien Ang, "From White Australia to Fortress Australia," 53, emphasis added. See also Gwenda Tavan, *The Long, Slow Death of White Australia* (North Carlton, Melbourne: Scribe, 2005).

<sup>28</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 163–164. Anderson points out how such nineteenth-century colonial institutions as the census, mapping and museums shored up the control and dominion of the colonial state—"the nature of the human beings it ruled, the geography of its domain, and the legitimacy of its ancestry"—and thus fed into its nationalism.

dominion.<sup>29</sup> The same year also saw the first implementation of the white Australia policy, in an effort to keep out Asian immigration (the so-called Yellow Peril), coinciding with legislation to curb the Indigenous presence in the island continent even further.<sup>30</sup> The structural link with British imperialism, laid down in its foundational moment and in its dominion status, explains why Australia is, as a settler nation, unable to gloss over the initial act of invasion, and shows itself as both the victim and the agent of imperialist forces:

Not only did Australia become in its own small way a colonising power in the Pacific region, where its behaviour was modelled exactly on current British practices, but more structurally in its formation it adopted the classic attitudes of imperialism in its treatment of the Indigenous people of Australia. Moreover, this crucial imperialist enterprise was not incorporated at all into the national myth, which could accommodate this major threat to national legitimacy only by not mentioning the matter.<sup>31</sup>

This omission produced Australian national identity through the application of a double standard. It is a definition of national identity that aligns with Benedict Anderson's view of nationhood as a community imagined as "deep, horizontal comradeship" which

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<sup>29</sup> While retaining the British King/Queen as its Head of State, a dominion is different from a crown colony in that it is seen to have acquired independent nationhood and to be in full control of its foreign affairs, international trade, and defense.

<sup>30</sup> Full-fledged official control of the Aboriginal population had started in the state of Victoria with the Aboriginal Protection Act 1869 but states of slower settlement were later to legislate—e.g., the Aborigines Act 1905 of Western Australia. See, for instance, the Commonwealth Government, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *"Bringing Them Home": Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families* (Reconciliation and Social Justice Library, 1996–2007), <http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/special/rsjproject/rsjlibrary/hreoc/stolen/index.html> (accessed 5 July 2007), and Anna Haebich, *Broken Circles: Fragmenting Indigenous Families 1800–2000* (Fremantle, WA: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2001).

<sup>31</sup> Hodge & Mishra, *Dark Side of the Dream*, xiii.

necessarily displays uncanny “amnesias” to be effectively established.<sup>32</sup> On the one hand, it is imbued with the strong egalitarianism encapsulated in the ‘bush myth’.<sup>33</sup> This narrative serves to counter the class inequalities inherent in a colonization process drawing on a prison population, and to accommodate these descendants of the poor metropolitan rejects of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British capitalism in a postcolonial Eden that was clearly differentiated from the harsh conditions of living in the motherland. On the other, while the bush myth may suggest an Indigenous take on the national stereotype—perhaps iconically represented by the actor Paul Hogan in the *Crocodile Dundee* trilogy (1986, 1988, and 2001)—the Australian Bush and Outback are not the domain of the Indigenous peoples but of racism and male chauvinism, overridden by a leveling of class differences—the ‘excess’ of one obscures the (Indigenous) other. As Therese M. Caiter writes, “white Australian identity first and foremost had to set itself off from indigenous culture as the opposite ‘other’ in order to come to terms with itself,”<sup>34</sup> in what was an uncanny act of psychological projection, one might add.

Thus, the configuration of Australianness took place in a double bind of disobedience of the metropole and aggression toward the Indigenous population, configuring racism in specific ways. Racism

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<sup>32</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 7, 205.

<sup>33</sup> An egalitarian and anti-authoritarian philosophy of mateship among resourceful independent white males living in the Australian bush—see “The Australian Bush,” at *Australian Government Culture and Recreation Portal* (2006), <http://www.cultureandrecreation.gov.au/articles/bush/> (accessed 18 January 2006).

<sup>34</sup> See Therese M. Caiter, “The Other Side of Us.” See also Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 150. One can usefully add his arguments on postcolonial racism to this: “Where racism developed outside Europe in the nineteenth century, it was always associated with European domination [...] Colonial racism was a major element in that conception of ‘Empire’ which attempted to weld dynastic legitimacy and national community. It did so by generalizing a principle of innate, inherited superiority on which its own domestic position was (however shakily) based to the vastness of the overseas possessions, covertly (or not so covertly) conveying the idea that if, say, English lords were naturally superior to other Englishmen, no matter: these other Englishmen were no less superior to the subjected natives.”



served to distinguish the colonizers from their European homelands and to forge a white yet Australian national identity:

the sign 'Australians' would be taken to mean not the primitive inhabitants of the primordial antipodes, as constructed in the modernist intellectual tradition, but 'white inhabitants'—intrepid pioneers, hardworking pastoralists, industrious miners, assiduous metal manufacturers, bronzed surfers, etc.<sup>35</sup>

The continent was in the new imaginary (pre)dominantly inhabited by the "bushranger," defined as a "Caucasian adult male [and] itinerant rural worker of no fixed address." His values, speech, and thought are the quintessential representation of what is typically seen as "Australian authenticity, as a touchstone of Australian identity."<sup>36</sup> Whereas class is subsumed in this articulation of Australian identity as white male Anglo-Celtic, its legitimacy is built on uncanny voids. The Indigenous scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson can therefore write:

whiteness is both the measure and the marker of normality in Australian society, yet it remains invisible for most white women and men, and they do not associate it with conferring dominance and privilege.<sup>37</sup>

Nor does the bushranger represent the urban mainstream, which absorbs increasing proportions of Australia's population. Thus, the bushranger articulates a double myth; by exclusions and romantic nostalgia for an irrecoverable British male settler past, it "encodes a class, race and gender identity which classifies women, Aborigines

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<sup>35</sup> John Hartley, quoted in Philip Batty, "Saluting the Dot-Spangled Banner: Aboriginal Culture, National Identity and the Australian Republic," *Australian Humanities Review* 11 (September–November 1998), <http://www.lib.latrobe.edu.au/AHR/archive.html> (accessed 6 July 2006).

<sup>36</sup> Hodge & Mishra, *Dark Side of the Dream*, xv.

<sup>37</sup> Moreton-Robinson, "I Still Call Australia Home," 66. Her conference paper was given in 1999 at the University of Technology, Sydney.

and new migrants as ‘unAustralian’.”<sup>38</sup> The presumption of class equality in Australian national identity justifies Homi Bhabha’s highlighting of race and gender in postcolonizing redefinitions of Self and Other.

In a comparative analysis of multiculturalisms, Sneja Gunew sees a productive role for local and global, diasporic communities in the questioning of nationalist myths but also points out the pitfalls this may entail in terms of the nostalgic recovery of a lost, meaningful past or the pitting of groups against each other using a simplistic black and white binary without considering intragroup diversity. Rather, she suggests,

The way ahead in terms of analysing cultural texts of any kind seems to be to denaturalise the classificatory categories invoked to stabilize and legitimate all types of nation-building and here the constellation of terms—multiculturalism, ethnicity, race, postcolonialism—all have their shifting and shifty roles to play.<sup>39</sup>

This changeability and elusiveness suggests that Indigeneity can be strategically employed to interrogate the exclusionary definitions that underpin the mechanics of racial/ethnic and gender discrimination in the Australian context, in their overlap with class. Whiteness as Australianness can be questioned by

the other tradition in the iconography of Australia that gestures at the secret of the Australian obsession with legitimacy: the occluded but central and problematic place of Aboriginal Australians in the foundation of the contemporary Australian State and in the construction of the national identity.<sup>40</sup>

### **Indigeneity and Race**

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<sup>38</sup> Hodge & Mishra, *Dark Side of the Dream*, xv.

<sup>39</sup> Sneja Gunew, *Haunted Nations*, 29.

<sup>40</sup> Hodge & Mishra. *Dark Side of the Dream*, 24.

Bain Attwood holds that in recent years “Aboriginality has become central to defining Australian identity and nationhood to an unprecedented degree,”<sup>41</sup> and Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs see the uncanny activated in the “vexed”<sup>42</sup> fit of the Indigenous population in Australian society.<sup>43</sup> Gelder and Jacobs argue that the psycho-spatial parameters of Australianness are disturbingly unsettled by the 1990s legislation offering the Indigenes a possibility to retrieve lands they lost by the application of *terra nullius* during colonization.<sup>44</sup> To what extent is this true?

The white settler’s negation/repression of the Indigenous presence in the continent took shape through the concept of a blank, virgin territory to be occupied at their convenience, brandishing the kind of “wishful thinking characteristic of colonialist ventures” that nowadays has been proved erroneous.<sup>45</sup> The eighteenth-century concept of *terra nullius* or “a land belonging to no one”<sup>46</sup> denied Indigenous cultures human status and therefore conferred ownership of their land on white settlers within a Western legal framework—common law—for more than two centuries. The European construction of Indigeneity as ‘an absence or lack’ grew out of an Enlightenment vision of progress, which put ‘savages’ at the bottom of the ladder of civilization. Their presumed incapacity to work the land and make it productive in capitalist terms did away

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<sup>41</sup> Attwood, *In the Age of Mabo*, xxiii.

<sup>42</sup> Sneja Gunew, “Denaturalizing cultural nationalisms: multicultural readings of Australia,” in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990): 100.

<sup>43</sup> Ken Gelder & Jane Jacobs, *Uncanny Australia*, xiv.

<sup>44</sup> Gelder & Jacobs, *Uncanny Australia*, 135.

<sup>45</sup> Sheila Collingwood-Whittick, “Re-presenting the Australian Aborigine: Autoethnography vs Colonialist Discourse,” *World Literature Written in English* 38.2 (2000): 113.

<sup>46</sup> Henry Reynolds, *The Law of the Land*, 14-15. He specifies that *terra nullius* “means both a country without a sovereign recognised by European authorities and a territory where nobody owns any land at all, where no tenure of any sort exists [...] European powers adopted the view that countries without political organisation, recognisable systems of authority or legal codes could legitimately be annexed. It was a case of supplying sovereignty where none existed.”

with any claims on landownership they might have entertained in European eyes:

this attribution of progress to European possession of the land and to Indigenous dispossession came to constitute the predominant and the most enduring rationalization for British colonization.<sup>47</sup>

Apart from the “massive land-theft” perpetrated by British colonizers, it also led to genocidal policies, the denial of political representation for Aborigines, the non-inclusion of ‘full-blood’ Indigenous in the national census up to 1971, their exclusion from official history, and nuclear testing on Indigenous land in the 1950s, among other outrages. Although Australia “pride[s] itself on its democratic, *egalitarian* tradition,” these gross violations of human rights “testify to the inability—if not stubborn and cynical refusal—of the white community to integrate the existence of the Aborigine into its national representation.”<sup>48</sup>

The Mabo Judgment of 1992, followed by the implementation of the Native Title Act of 1993, ostensibly opened up legal ways for Indigenous Australians to reclaim tribal land from non-Indigenous settlers. In the case of *Eddie Mabo v. the State of Queensland* (1992),<sup>49</sup> the Australian High Court declared Native title consistent with common law,<sup>50</sup> acknowledging the legitimacy of Indigenous landownership in Australia “in accordance with the Racial Discrimination Act 1975.” Yet, in the Native Title Act, the Court stipulated the conditions under which Native title is not only upheld

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<sup>47</sup> Attwood, *In the Age of Mabo*, viii–x.

<sup>48</sup> Collingwood-Whittick, “Re-presenting the Australian Aborigine,” 114 (emphasis added).

<sup>49</sup> The land rights under dispute concerned Murray Island, or Mer, in the Torres Strait, which is the homeland of the Meriem people. Their traditional ownership of the island was recognized by the Australian High Court.

<sup>50</sup> See Elizabeth A. Povinelli, “The State of Shame: Australian Multiculturalism and the Crisis of Indigenous Citizenship,” *Critical Inquiry* 24.2 (Winter 1998): 579, footnote 13, in which she points out that “Native title is a form of beneficial title colonial subjects hold based on their traditional laws and customs. The state holds radical title, a form of title that gives the sovereign paramount power to create interests in land by grant or tenure.”

but also extinguished. The Mabo Judgment assumed that Native title rights could only apply to vacant Crown land, while it did not question land that the Crown had expropriated. As the latter had taken place without “the consent of the owner and payment of adequate compensation”<sup>51</sup> necessary under common law, the issue became what would happen to all that land now mostly occupied by settlers descended from Europeans. These conflicting interests ambivalently fleshed out in the 1996 Wik Decision, which ruled that Native title cannot take away pastoralists’ rights under the terms of their existing leases. Thus, Wik represents a partial dismantling of Native Title.

Unjustly, the new legislation places the responsibility for validation and authentication of Native title wholly on Indigenous Australians; thus, claims only have a chance of success if Indigenous belonging can be validated through a “recurrent pattern of physical presence on the land.”<sup>52</sup> This is, in its disregard of traditional orality and in the face of Indigenous genocide, dispossession, and displacement, often an arduous task and so a cynical requirement. Validation normally involves the establishment of a sense of sacredness which links local land features to the Indigenous cosmogony known as the Dreamtime beliefs or Dreamings.<sup>53</sup> These sacred relationships existing from time immemorial play a key role

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<sup>51</sup> Reynolds, *The Law of the Land*, 48–49.

<sup>52</sup> Merete Falck Borch, “Eddie Mabo and Others v. the State of Queensland, 1992: The Significance of Court Recognition of Landrights in Australia,” *Kunapipi* 14.1 (1992): 11.

<sup>53</sup> Falck Borch, “Eddie Mabo and Others,” 3. For a description of the Dreaming, see Deborah Bird Rose, “The power of place,” in *The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture*, ed. Sylvia Kleinert & Margo Neale (Melbourne: Oxford UP, 2000): 40–49. Rose describes the dreaming as a series of origin stories that explain how in a distant past the Totemic Ancestors gave shape to the elements, the land, and all life forms, organizing all into an interconnected and interdependent network. Totemic spirits are contained in the physical features of the land and denote the ongoing connection of the Dreamtime with contemporary Aboriginal societies. Dreamtime sites have Secret–Sacred qualities and, within clan law and logic, are not to be visited without due preparation and authorisation. Indigenous possession of the land is interpreted as custodianship; this is the care for and the observance of ritual related to the land and all that lives on it, especially where sacred sites are concerned.

in court hearings regarding Native title on particular plots of land, which has often clashed with their secret/taboo character, thereby adding additional difficulty to its validation.<sup>54</sup>

In 1992, the creation of the first legal grounds and provisions that enabled Native Title cases to prosper gave rise to optimism,<sup>55</sup> but as the new legislation was put to the test, its effects came to be considered symbolic rather than material. In 1998, Philip Batty highlighted the self-serving undercurrent in the High Court decision,

[which] was made, to a large extent, to mitigate against Australia's international embarrassment at the continuing decrepitude of Indigenous living conditions, to assuage the morally vexatious reality that until recently, Australia treated its indigenous people more like animals than human beings, and importantly, to elide the fact that the indigenous population remains deeply dependent upon, and directly subject to the machinations of the Australian state.<sup>56</sup>

Kent McNeil, a non-Indigenous specialist in Indigenous land rights, gives Batty's misgivings ample foundations. In 1996, he took issue with the new legislation's favorable treatment of state over Indigenous land rights, arguing that common law protects private property rights from the abuse of state power, but that this principle is not recognized in the new Native title legislation, thus discriminating against Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders.<sup>57</sup> The Wik Decision and later developments confirmed McNeil's view. In 1998, the conservative Howard government passed the Native Title Amendment Act (the so-called "Ten Point Plan") which placed further restrictions on Indigenous land claims. Indeed, as one legal source holds,

These amendments made the Native Title Act more complicated, increased the number of procedural

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<sup>54</sup> Gelder & Jacobs, *Uncanny Australia*, 101, 117–118.

<sup>55</sup> Falck Borch, "Eddie Mabo and Others," 11.

<sup>56</sup> Batty, "Saluting the Dot-Spangled Banner."

<sup>57</sup> Quoted in Reynolds, *The Law of the Land*, 237–238 (emphasis added). The original essay appeared in the *Australian Indigenous Law Reporter* 45 (1996).

requirements that Native title claimants had to meet and cut back the tenures over which a native title claim could be made.”<sup>58</sup>

Therefore, the current legislation turned out to be a double-edged sword.<sup>59</sup> In 1994, the Indigenous scholar and novelist Fabienne Bayet-Charlton already expressed her disappointment that “native title legislation has been [...] watered down from its original intentions”:

those seeking to claim title to their land have so many provisos attached, so many hoops to jump through, so many hurdles to jump over, before a claim sees the light of day in the courts. These claims can then be rejected if records indicate that a non-Aboriginal person has so much as farted on that land. Native title has lost all but its simple and superficial meaning. This is a tragedy, considering all the good will and effort that went into the debating and formulating of the original legislation.<sup>60</sup>

And Henry Reynolds’ conclusion, a decade later, agrees that while “[Mabo’s] significance should not be underestimated [...] it is so much less than what many people hoped for and expected in those heady days in June 1992.”<sup>61</sup>

Due to what is nowadays often understood as its limited legal scope, the Mabo Decision should be considered in terms of its psycho-social rather than material impact, which, to follow Gelder and Jacobs, still allows for uncanny manifestations of Australianness.

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<sup>58</sup> See “The Native Title Act and the 10-Point Plan,” at *Australasian Legal Information Institute: A joint facility of UTS and UNSW Faculties of Law* (2000), [http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/other/liac/hot\\_topic/hottopic/2000/2/4.html](http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/other/liac/hot_topic/hottopic/2000/2/4.html) (accessed 22 June 2007).

<sup>59</sup> Patrick Wolfe, “The Limits of Native Title,” *Meanjin* 59.3 (2000): 142.

<sup>60</sup> Fabienne Bayet-Charlton, “Overturning the Doctrine: Indigenous peoples and wilderness—being Aboriginal in the environmental movement” (1994), in *Blacklines: Contemporary Critical Writing by Indigenous Australians*, ed. Michèle Grossman (Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne UP, 2003): 180.

<sup>61</sup> Reynolds, *The Law of the Land*, 246.

The North American anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli picks up on Mabo's disquieting agenda when she describes "native title [...] as a *fetish of national anxieties* about the status, role and future of the Australian nation." This she sees as the reason for "the widespread public debates resulting from the [Mabo] case":

Native title condenses and stands in for Australian aspirations for First Worldness (symbolically white, Euro-American) on the margins of Euro-American and Asia-Pacific domination—the Aboriginal subject (indigenous blackness) standing as the material to be worked over for the nation to maintain its place in (Western) modernity. The court's use of the shamed Anglo-Celtic Australian fixed the ideal image of the nation as a white, global player in the national imaginary.<sup>62</sup>

Rather than a serious attempt to come to terms with the great injustices inflicted upon the Indigenes over two centuries of (neo)colonial rule, Mabo self-interestedly appealed to the status of Australia as a great, democratic nation.

While plenty of non-Indigenous Australians took up Mabo's political challenge and identified with the agenda of the progressive Keating government, observers like Povinelli, McNeil, and Attwood might doubt its sincerity for its drive against Indigenous sovereignty.<sup>63</sup> In his famous Redfern speech, which symbolically launched the International Year for the World's Indigenous People in Australia, PM Paul Keating opened his arms to Indigenous Australia in an act of self-criticism and reconciliation:

Isn't it reasonable to say that if we can build a prosperous and remarkably harmonious multicultural society in Australia, surely we can find just solutions to the problems which beset the first Australians—the people to whom the most injustice has been done. And, as I say, the starting point might be to

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<sup>62</sup> Povinelli, "The State of Shame," 597 (emphasis added).

<sup>63</sup> See Attwood, *In the Age of Mabo*, xxxv.



recognise that the problem starts with us non-Indigenous Australians.<sup>64</sup>

Although Keating's words appeal to respect for Indigeneity, the response from conservative Australian mainstream factions has often been "too grudging and legalistic."<sup>65</sup> Thus, both the relative ineffectuality of Native Title and the mainstream "hysteria and hostility"<sup>66</sup> it caused are tantamount to the perseverance of white amnesias in Australia's official history and identity, and the resistance to coming to terms with these.

With the overthrow of the *terra nullius* myth in 1992,<sup>67</sup> the Aborigine was re-emerging on the Australian map and old colonial tables were tentatively turned. With the new legislation came the issue of whether place and identity could be assigned according to European standards alone. This reversal of settler primacy dislocated white essentialist readings of Australia<sup>68</sup> and brought to the fore the special minority status and cultural difference of the Indigenous peoples. Indeed, Australian multiculturalism's underlying institutional agenda of disguised assimilation was clashing with the rights, needs, and demands of the Indigenous population. As Sneja Gunew had already stated in 1990,

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<sup>64</sup> Paul Keating, "Australian Launch of the International Year for the World's Indigenous People," in *Apology Australia* (1992), <http://www.apology.west.net.au/redfern.html> (accessed 29 March 2002). The then Prime Minister of Australia, Paul Keating, gave this speech at Redfern Park in Sydney on 10 December 1992. Redfern is an inner city suburb of Sydney with a historically large Aboriginal population.

<sup>65</sup> See Reynolds, *The Law of the Land*, 247–248. How reluctant Australia is to come to terms with its legacy of colonial injustice towards the Aborigines is shown in the fact that its legislation seriously lags behind that of the other white-settler colonies: "Australian courts have quite consciously rejected the idea that the Crown had a duty of care [...] towards the indigenous people. That has been accepted in the United States since the nineteenth century and has more recently been incorporated in the law in Canada and New Zealand."

<sup>66</sup> Keating, "Australian Launch."

<sup>67</sup> See also Reynolds, *The Law of the Land*, 212; Gelder & Jacobs, *Uncanny Australia*.

<sup>68</sup> Gelder & Jacobs, *Uncanny Australia*, 135, 138.

Multiculturalism becomes too often an effective process of recuperation whereby diverse cultures are returned homogenized as folkloric spectacle. This recuperation serves to legitimate a European charter myth of origins which, in the name of civilisation and process, condones those 200 years of colonial rule which were *not* celebrated by the Aborigines in 1988.<sup>69</sup>

Keating's multiculturalist tenets officially recognized that "complex as contemporary identity is, it cannot be separated from Aboriginal Australia,"<sup>70</sup> but this is played out in both the territorial and the psychological nation space. The reinstatement of *terra aboriginum* is now possible as a gesture toward an underprivileged minority group which has now often been perceived as entitled to 'too much'. Such resentment has prevailed among part of the white mainstream, especially in the traditional economic strongholds of the mining industry and pastoralism, which ardently dispute Indigenous land rights. Thus, the need for material redress for the Indigenes along with white fear of losing privilege and property has often translated into mainstream denial of past and present wrongs, or into what Gelder and Jacobs call bouts of "postcolonial racism."<sup>71</sup>

Postcolonial racism manifests itself in white settlers who, seeing Aborigines as enjoying too much care, too many privileges, consequently bend the multiculturalist argument to their own needs. In the 1990s, an uncanny white 'underdog'—mainly the impoverished lower-middle and working classes located in white rural areas, led by Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party—claimed minority status so as to justify and give strength to their own demands, which fed into the general conservative landslide victory of 1996.<sup>72</sup> In her notorious maiden speech to the House of Representatives of the Australian Federal Parliament on 10 September 1996, Hanson proclaimed:

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<sup>69</sup> Gunew, "Denaturalizing cultural nationalisms," 112. 1988 was the year of the Bicentennial.

<sup>70</sup> Keating, "Australian Launch."

<sup>71</sup> Gelder & Jacobs, *Uncanny Australia*, 17.

<sup>72</sup> *Uncanny Australia*, xii.

We now have a situation where a type of *reverse racism* is applied to mainstream Australians by those who promote political correctness and those who control the various taxpayer funded ‘industries’ that flourish in our society, servicing Aboriginals, multiculturalists, and a host of other minority groups [...] Along with millions of Australians, I am fed up to the back teeth with the inequalities that are being promoted by the government and paid for by the taxpayer under the assumption that Aboriginals are the most disadvantaged people in Australia.<sup>73</sup>

Thus, Ien Ang argues that “the structures of feeling of white Australia have not disappeared in a time of Aboriginal reconciliation and multiculturalism,”<sup>74</sup> and that Hansonism lives on in the larger bloc of conservative political parties in power for three successive terms as of 1996. She points out that its Prime Minister John Howard, in line with the political correctness expected from mainstream politicians in multiculturalist Australia, was formally opposed to Hanson’s “unsophisticated racist indiscretions.” However, he dignified Hanson’s blatant white populism by embedding it in a discourse of “mainstream common sense,” a mainstream that was at odds with reconciliation, immigration, multiculturalism, and anything else that would threaten “‘the Australian way of life.’”<sup>75</sup>

Notably, the ambiguities of postcolonial racism have surfaced in the frictional calls for *Reconciliation* and *Apology* over the last three decades—an apology that was finally offered to the nation in February 2008 by the Labor Party’s Prime Minister Kevin Rudd on assuming office in Parliament. The terms Reconciliation and Apology have embodied the clash between what Aborigines and progressive non-Indigenous Australians feel as the need for an officially endorsed ‘Sorry’, and what conservative mainstreamers

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<sup>73</sup> Laura Tingle, “Behind the Lines,” *The Age* (15 November 1996): A15, <http://www.lamp.ac.uk/~alh/local/hanson1.html> (accessed 20 July 2005); Pauline Hanson, “Maiden Speech,” in *Paulinehanson.com* (1996, 2007): 1, emphasis added, <http://www.paulinehanson.com.au/pauline-maiden-speech.pdf> (accessed 27 June 2007).

<sup>74</sup> Ien Ang, “From White Australia to Fortress Australia,” 51–52.

<sup>75</sup> Ang, “From White Australia to Fortress Australia,” 52.

perceive as an excessive and—to use the spatial metaphor—‘out-of-place’ recognition of white guilt. From a progressive perspective, Reconciliation could be defined as the revision of the narrative of Indigenous/non-Indigenous contact with the official acknowledgement of “a colonial legacy of invasion, dispossession and injustice,” with the aim of effecting “closure to this colonial narrative by recognizing Aboriginal claims upon the historical past from which the settler nation constructed its ‘nation.’”<sup>76</sup> This policy, which should be understood “to bring the nation into contact with the ghosts of its past, restructuring the nation’s sense of itself by returning the grim truth of colonisation to the story of Australia’s being-in-the-world,”<sup>77</sup> was officially embraced by the Labor government in 1992. Nevertheless, the ambiguous positioning of mainstream society in this process causes many Aborigines to hold that “there can never be any reconciliation between Black and white Australians until our sorry past is redressed.”<sup>78</sup> Philip Batty accordingly points out the more self-interested undercurrents in Reconciliation:

through the Mabo decision, Australia continues to seek a sense of identity through yet another reinvention of Aboriginal culture, but this time it is constituted not as a problem to be eradicated, or assimilated—but as *a site of national redemption*, where Australia can reaffirm its most cherished beliefs about itself; that is, as a fair-minded, just, and compassionate global citizen.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Lucy Frost, “Fear of Passing.”

<sup>77</sup> Gelder & Jacobs, *Uncanny Australia*, 30.

<sup>78</sup> Ruby Langford Ginibi, “Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance,” *Revista Española del Pacífico* 14/11.2 (2001): 219.

<sup>79</sup> Batty, “Saluting the Dot-Spangled Banner,” emphasis added. See also Keating, “Australian Launch.” PM Paul Keating, in his famous Redfern speech in Sydney on 10 December 1992, said, “in truth, we cannot confidently say that we have succeeded as we would like to have succeeded if we have not managed to extend opportunity and care, dignity and hope to the indigenous people of Australia—the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people. This is a fundamental test of our social goals and our national will: our ability to say to ourselves and the rest of the world that Australia is a first rate social democracy, that we are what we should be—truly the land of the fair go and the better chance.” Indeed, Keating’s

In other words, the process of Reconciliation is reassimilated to traditional white Australianness by foregrounding the nation's presumed democratic and egalitarian qualities—the so-called 'fair go' for all its citizens.

In response, Therese Caiter argues that "this 'new' construction of Aboriginal culture is a lot less new than it might seem."<sup>80</sup> Therefore, Indigenous criticism of a multicultural project on white terms is not trivial; where recognition of difference, self-definition, and self-determination should be common currency,

the central problem is the failure of non-Aboriginals to comprehend [...] Aboriginal people, or to find the grounds for *an* understanding. Each policy—protection, assimilation, integration, self-management and, perhaps, reconciliation—can be seen as ways of avoiding understanding."<sup>81</sup>

Such unwillingness is seen in Prime Minister John Howard's *Motion of Reconciliation* of 26 August 1999, which eloquently expresses the mixed feelings embedded in postcolonial racism:

present generations of Australians cannot be held accountable, and we should not seek to hold them accountable, for the errors and misdeeds of earlier generations. Nor should we ever forget that many people who were involved in some of the practices which caused hurt and trauma felt at the time those practices were properly based. To apply retrospectively the standards of today in relation to their behaviour does some of those people who were sincere a gross injustice. *The Australian people do not want to embroil themselves in an exercise of shame and guilt.*<sup>82</sup>

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words turn Reconciliation into a redemptive site where 'authentic' Australianness may be retrieved.

<sup>80</sup> Therese M. Caiter, "The Other Side of Us."

<sup>81</sup> Marcia Langton, "Well, I heard it on the radio and I saw it on the television...", 38–39.

<sup>82</sup> Quoted in Chris Cunneen & Terry Libesman, "An Apology for Expressing Regret?" *Meanjin* 59.1 (2000): 153, emphasis added.

Consequently, as a political movement, Reconciliation faced an uncertain future after a decade of Conservative government. Right-wing rule curtailed Australia's official commitment to multiculturalist issues in the broadest sense; not only did this come to the fore in its curtailing of Native title in 1998, the suppression of ATSIC in 2005, and the Northern Territory intervention in 2007,<sup>83</sup> but also in its restrictive immigration policy after the attack on the Twin Towers in 2001, leading to the *Tampa* crisis. Also, the official Apology was not accompanied by a serious program of aid and funding to tackle the ingrained causes of the underprivileged state of many Indigenous people.<sup>84</sup> Evidently, the Apology is only a first step on a long road toward the effective redress for a past of invasion, dispossession, and genocide and a present of dysfunction and distress. Apology should not only take place in the area of the symbolic, but also translate into material improvements and give shape to the kind of treaties between indigenous and non-indigenous society operative in Canada, the USA, and New Zealand.

What Cunneen and Libesman call John Howard's "twisted logic of genocide denial," which disturbingly presents past atrocities as well-meant policies, points to a great psychological need to wash white hands of the terrors instigated by European civilization over two centuries of white invasion. The list of self-serving, racist crimes is long. The straightforward extermination of Indigenous nations, starting with British settlement, "occurred in every Australian State until 1928." Forced segregation of Indigenes in camps, missions, and reserves to separate them from white settler society began to be implemented in the 1850s and lasted up until 1930. The official

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<sup>83</sup> The conservative Howard government intervened with a military and police task force in Aboriginal affairs in the Northern Territory on 21 June 2007, after insistent rumours and reports about child sexual abuse in remote Aboriginal communities. For extensive criticism of these governmental actions, see *Coercive Reconciliation: Stabilise, Normalise, Exit Aboriginal Australia*, ed. Jon Altman & Melinda Hinkson (North Carlton, Melbourne: Arena, 2007).

<sup>84</sup> Tim Johnston, "Australia Says 'Sorry' to Aborigines for Mistreatment," *New York Times* (13 February 2008): A14, [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/13/world/asia/13aborigine.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/13/world/asia/13aborigine.html?_r=0) (accessed 6 March 2016).

'breeding-out' policy now known as the Stolen Generations—the forced, institutionalized removal of 'half-caste' children from their Indigenous families living on reserves to special homes and/or white foster-families—was carried out from the 1930s until the 1970s.<sup>85</sup> While it is obvious that the traumatic impact of these events on the Indigenous peoples must have been devastating, the full recognition of their suffering is still a matter of contention.

Sneja Gunew argues that mainstream unwillingness to come to terms with the past is connected not only to the repression of a dark history of violence against the Indigenous but also to the undigested episode of the violent and cruel imperial rejection of white convicts by the Motherland:

white Australia has always been riddled with anxious debates concerning its national identity. Since white settlement initially took the form of penal colonies, it was difficult from the outset to sustain the myth (as in America) of a new Eden. Australia was resolutely postlapsarian. The culture represented by the white intruders was consistently opposed to a 'nature' designated hostile (a nature which included the original Indigenous inhabitants who were not so much colonized as systematically exterminated along with other obstacles in the path of white colonization).<sup>86</sup>

This reveals an uncanny reversal in the genocidal process: it is the projection of the ruling classes' fear of a reappearance of Britain's social tensions among its own impoverished urban masses onto a dark foil, the Australian Aborigines.<sup>87</sup> On such a view, Indigenous extermination, segregation, and breeding-out all form part of an uninterrupted chain of genocidal policies from the first British settlement to the advent of multiculturalism, by which white-settler society aims to exorcise its own penal past from the collective psyche.

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<sup>85</sup> Collingwood-Whittick, "Re-presenting the Australian Aborigine," 117, 120–123. For a detailed study of forced Aboriginal child removal, see Anna Haebich, *Broken Circles*.

<sup>86</sup> Gunew, "Denaturalizing cultural nationalisms," 103.

<sup>87</sup> Collingwood-Whittick, "Re-presenting the Australian Aborigine," 123.

Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs locate Indigenous land claims “as crucial in the recasting of Australia’s sense of itself”<sup>88</sup> and therefore argue that the mainstream’s lost sense of home results from a typically postcolonizing context; whereas in colonial times the Indigenous had neither citizen status nor vote, nowadays “the claims that Aboriginal people [...] make on Australia work themselves out first and foremost in the *political* sphere.”<sup>89</sup> While the latter may be true, Gelder and Jacobs take for granted that Native title claims do obtain, but are proven wrong by the hard facts. So Henry Reynolds muses:

What will have been achieved [after Mabo]? A handful of cases where native title has been affirmed in the courts; some agreements outside them; a few land-use agreements and negotiated contracts between native title holders.<sup>90</sup>

In this sense, Gelder and Jacobs’s analysis is affected by the very ambiguity and amnesia it aims to research and understand. Yet, one can agree with them that, while multiculturalism can be described as a *political* ideal of respectful coexistence by the egalitarian, democratic interaction of cultural diversity within a postcolonial nation space, the Australian particulars give rise to anxiety and conflict whenever Indigenous and non-Indigenous culture enter into contact. These cultures are seemingly incommensurable in their worlds of experience and demands, yet bound to ‘get along’ in a shared site which is at once homely and unhomely. This inscribes Homi Bhabha’s “strange cultural survival” of minority culture strongly in race; but what about ethnicity?

### **Non-European Immigration and Ethnicity**

Significantly, the treatment of more recent waves of immigration to Australia bears structural links to historical state policies toward

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<sup>88</sup> Gelder & Jacobs, *Uncanny Australia*, 3.

<sup>89</sup> *Uncanny Australia*, 13.

<sup>90</sup> Reynolds, *The Law of the Land*, 246.



Aborigines. Sneja Gunew's portrayal of the subversive undercurrents in Australian multiculturalism opens up the migrant experience to a similar set of disquieting frictions when confronting Anglo-Celtic settler culture. In opposing Australia as heaven for non-British post-World War Two immigration to hell for the descendants of convicts, she argues that to be a new Australian

was to be a boundary crosser, a transgressor, in the eyes of those who like to think that they had already been t/here. In their very being those new Australians represented in boundaries, or margins, those marginal voices which bordered the known country and were themselves hybrids comprising both the known and the unknown.<sup>91</sup>

Gunew therefore observes that "those who are able to think from the beginning in more than one language find it impossible to consider language as a 'natural' and unproblematic expression of experience." She links this to the possibility of multiculturalism as an ethnic "counter-public sphere" in which dissident voices may be heard.<sup>92</sup> If dissidence can be validated rather than assimilated and neutralized through multiculturalism, this calls into being strange cultural survivals in the liminality of the nation space where the uncanny obtains, especially when recent Australian immigration increasingly lacks a close-enough-for-comfort European background.

Ien Ang's analysis of conservative white policies in reaction to the changing shape of contemporary immigration opens up the issue of immigration fully to white fears. Her essay is indebted to Said's *Orientalism* in postulating that white Anglo-Celtic settlers defined Australia foundationally against Asia; the vast and relatively empty island continent was a vulnerable "far-flung outpost of Europe" in which "the fear of invasion was intensely heightened when the invader was imagined as 'Asian': so geographically proximate, so threateningly multitudinous, and not least, so alienly non-white."<sup>93</sup> On the one hand, this definition of Australianness from *without*

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<sup>91</sup> Gunew, "Denaturalizing cultural nationalisms," 111.

<sup>92</sup> "Denaturalizing cultural nationalisms," 114.

<sup>93</sup> Ang, "From White Australia to Fortress Australia," 55-56.

(Orientalist in nature) fed back into the coexistent one from *within* against the Aborigines (aboriginalist in nature) by promoting the conceptual isolation of the Indigenous Australians from related ethnic groups in the Indonesian archipelago. This conceptual bind, in turn, would represent yet another step in the justification of the 'doomed-race' philosophy and the genocidal agenda. On the other hand, the need to defend the outer bounds of Australianness laid the foundations for the 1901 Immigration Restriction Act, later known as the White Australia Policy, which was specifically conceived to keep Chinese and Japanese immigrants out of the country. As late as 1996, Pauline Hanson proclaimed:

I and most Australians want our immigration policy radically reviewed and that of multiculturalism abolished. I believe we are in danger of being swamped by Asians. Between 1984 and 1995, 40% of all migrants into this country were of Asian origin. They have their own culture and religion, form ghettos and do not assimilate.<sup>94</sup>

Her words justify Ian Ang's observation:

the legacy of white Australia policy still lingers, expressed in the anxiety articulated in the fear that new, especially Asian, migrants might be *too* successful in gaining space within the Australian nation.<sup>95</sup>

The notion of 'too much' in these lines returns us to postcolonial racism, which fears the loss of a eurocentric, Anglo-Celtic national identity. Here, the fear of the non-European other is based on the belief that a massive influx of especially Asian immigrants could "Aboriginalise" Australia, meaning that "white Australia would one day suffer the same fate as Aboriginal Australia."<sup>96</sup> In this vision, the European settler would ultimately conflate with the Indigene in an uncanny minority position, a possibility that would have to be

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<sup>94</sup> Tingle, "Behind the Lines"; Hanson, "Maiden Speech," 3.

<sup>95</sup> Ang, "From White Australia to Fortress Australia," 68.

<sup>96</sup> "From White Australia to Fortress Australia," 60.

exorcized at all costs. As with the Aborigine, this fear, real enough as it is, is far from realistic. The *Age's* journalist Laura Tingle contrasted Pauline Hanson's claims with statistical material and found the Yellow Peril to be lacking in substance:

It is true that between 1984 and 1995, 40 per cent of migrants were from Asia. About 30 per cent came from Europe and Britain. However, only 4 per cent of the population is Asian-born. Labor argues that if 50 per cent of immigrants come from Asia for the next 35 years, it would still only increase the Asian-born component of the population to 7 per cent.<sup>97</sup>

### Gender

Marcia Langton wrote that "the intersection of 'race' and gender continues to require deconstruction to allow us to decolonise our consciousness."<sup>98</sup> Sneja Gunew addresses gender by maintaining that, as with land, culture "must be governed by customary laws of ownership and inheritance. Multiculturalism, the very term, suggests paternal confusion and maternal promiscuity." This metaphor points at the ambiguous nature of Australian multiculturalism; it is yet another form of assimilation in which cultural diversity is controlled and curtailed to male WASP benefit, but also boosts a large body of writing from other cultural backgrounds that demands inclusion and acceptance, leading to an "inevitably chang[e in] the genealogy or legitimating myth of origins on which all national cultures are based."<sup>99</sup> The promiscuous quality of this maternal wealth of minority manifestations sprouting from Australian soil interrogates and confuses monolithic patriarchal Anglo-Celtic visions of Australian identity by disclosing and foregrounding cultural difference. This sees the paternal as hierarchical, static, and sterile, whereas the maternal is egalitarian, dynamic, and productive.

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<sup>97</sup> Tingle, "Behind the Lines."

<sup>98</sup> Langton, "Well, I heard it on the radio", 54.

<sup>99</sup> Gunew, "Denaturalizing cultural nationalisms," 100.

Manifestations of cultural difference therefore operate in a counter-public sphere that activates gender to interrogate officially endorsed views and policies regarding national culture. That this is a project that should be firmly embedded in the local for its effectiveness is apparent in Gunew's avowal of "the situatedness of a multicultural dynamics"<sup>100</sup> and Gayatri Spivak's assertion that "there is no virtue in global laundry lists with 'woman' as a pious item."<sup>101</sup>

While in *Uncanny Australia* Gelder and Jacobs state that in Australia "ethnicity is a category which is mobilized through the agendas of multiculturalism" and put to use as the "primary social category" before class and gender,<sup>102</sup> their chapter entitled "Promiscuous sacredness" strongly maps across gender. Here, promiscuity emulates Gunew's use of the term: a discursive disposition, enveloped in secrecy, spills over into and interrogates another discursive terrain (128). 'Promiscuity' expresses how Secret-Sacred Indigenous 'women's business' can become activated in political and legal ambits, in that Indigenous land claims on sacred sites overlap productively with gender. In a claim on the sacred Welatye-Therre site near Alice Springs by the Arrernte women of Central Australia, a spokeswoman defends its secret female ceremonies celebrating female Indigenous ritual as practices with comparable agendas across cultural difference—to restore spiritual and emotional health to women (122).

Thus, the ambivalent presence of 'promiscuity' in the nation space, both praised and feared for its *de/constructive* potential of change, may reinforce the uncanny's relationship with gender as highlighted in Hélène Cixous' analysis. Freud's ideas on the oedipal constitution of culture and society evolve toward the "primal horde" in the fourth essay of *Totem and Taboo*, "The Infantile Recurrence of Totemism."<sup>103</sup> He takes as his point of departure the patriarchal Darwinist hypothesis that humans initially live in bands constituted of a single dominant male who controls all females and their offspring. However, one fateful day his young, excluded sons rebel

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<sup>100</sup> Gunew, *Haunted Nations*, 3.

<sup>101</sup> Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 308.

<sup>102</sup> Gelder & Jacobs, *Uncanny Australia*, 98. Further page references are in the main text.

<sup>103</sup> Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 86–138.

and kill their tyrannical father, take their mothers as their wives, and eat him, literally and symbolically acquiring his authority. The totem meal/feast is a reenactment of this crime that laid the foundations for the moral and religious organization of society. Out of remorse and fearful of fratricidal succession, the sons proclaim a double prohibition/taboo: neither must incest ever be committed nor the totem animal (once the father) killed. Thus,

The simultaneous sorrow and joy of the totemic feast represent both sides of ambivalence: The rite both enacts and expiates the crime [...] the memory of the father becomes the basis for the new moral system, authorized by the guilt felt by the brothers for their act.<sup>104</sup>

The primal-horde myth has been widely rejected as an impossible historical and theoretical construct, but as a common male *fantasy* it may be seen to motivate men's actions. In Robert A. Paul's words, the fantasy of the dominant male is a wish-fulfillment of "narcissistic and reproductive self-interest":

to father off-spring by as many women as possible, and to eliminate all rival males from competition by depriving them [...] of reproductive potential, that is, by 'castrating' them.<sup>105</sup>

It is, at heart, the age-old story of males competing for women's exclusive availability. Now, in Freud's view the incest taboo is the prime tool in the *patriarchal* management and control of social relations through the exertion of private and public prohibitions; this, in turn, locates the Oedipus complex at the heart of human society and culture by way of "cultural sublimations,"<sup>106</sup> under which

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<sup>104</sup> Robert A. Paul, "Freud's anthropology: A reading of the 'cultural books'," in *The Cambridge Companion to Freud*, ed. Jerome Neu (1991; Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996): 275.

<sup>105</sup> Paul, "Freud's anthropology," 276.

<sup>106</sup> "Freud's anthropology," 284. *The International Dictionary of Psychoanalysis* states that "Sublimation is a process that diverts the flow of instinctual energy from its immediate sexual aim and subordinates it to cultural endeavors [...]. The development of the ability to sublimate [...] was related for Freud both to the

the world of art and, thus, literature are subsumed. In defiance of male prerogative, promiscuity—in its widest sense—offers itself up as the liminal space in which the free circulation of desires, partners, ideas, texts etc. undoes patriarchal norms and makes way for new, liberating expressions of identity in its broadest sense. As such, strange cultural survival can be seen to operate in the racial, ethnic, as well as *gendered* liminality of the nation space. What shape(s) may this strangeness take?

### Political Agency

Individual, communal, and national identity formation lock into the flux of social change as race/ethnicity, gender, and class rearticulate and postcolonize subject positions, mediating between the physical body and the body politic. Thus, in a postmodern critique of ideology formation, the Marxist philosopher Slavoj Žižek takes issue with traditional psychoanalytical accounts of “misery and psychic suffering”

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individual's [...] initial strength of the sexual instinct and to the events of childhood [...]. Sublimation occurred at the expense of the polymorphously perverse drives of childhood (especially bisexuality), which were diverted and applied to other aims, as witness the sublimation of anal eroticism into an interest in money, or the link between urethral eroticism and ambition. This process contributed to the formation of character traits. The component instincts were of particular significance here: the instinct to see could be sublimated into artistic contemplation and into the instinct to know [...] while sublimated aggression could manifest itself as creative and innovative activity. But Freud always emphasized the risks associated with sublimation of the instincts when it takes place at the expense of the sexual and deprives the subject of immediate satisfaction. Although *sublimation appears as the guarantor of the social bond and promoter of culture*, it is, nonetheless, a dangerous demand [...] when it presents individual sublimations as ideal models [...]. Sublimation, which is often mentioned in the literature, by emphasizing the desexualization of goals and the social valorization of the object, remains both an essential concept and an unresolved question for psychoanalysis”—see “Sublimation,” in the *International Dictionary of Psychoanalysis* (The Gale Group, 2005; Answers.com, 2007), <http://www.answers.com/topic/sublimation> (accessed 6 July 2007).

through unconscious libidinal complexes, or even via a direct reference to the “death drive”, [which] renders the true causes of destructiveness invisible [...] Instead of the concrete analysis of external, actual conditions—the patriarchal family, its role in the totality of the reproduction of the capitalist system, and so on—we are thus given the story of unresolved libidinal deadlocks [...] In this perspective, the very striving for social change is denounced as an expression of an unresolved Oedipus complex.<sup>107</sup>

Žižek provides the Freudian framework of *repression* with its social basis of *oppression*. He believes that a central task of ideology criticism is to locate the material rather than psychological conditions that underpin the wish for social change. Thus, it ought

to designate the elements within an existing social order which—in the guise of ‘fiction’, that is, of ‘Utopian narratives’ of possible but failed alternative histories—point toward the system’s antagonistic character, and thus ‘estrangle’ us to the self-evidence of its established identity. (7)

According to Žižek, these dialectics of estrangement have an uncanny, ghostly appearance:

the very constitution of social reality involves the ‘primordial repression’ of an antagonism, so that the ultimate support of the critique of ideology [...] is not reality but the ‘repressed’ real of antagonism [...] what emerges via distortions of the accurate representation of reality is the real—that is, the trauma around which social reality is structured [...] the structure of social reality itself materializes an attempt to cope with the real of antagonism. ‘Reality’ itself, in so far as it is regulated by a symbolic fiction, conceals the real of an antagonism—and it is this real, foreclosed from the symbolic

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<sup>107</sup> Slavoj Žižek, “The Spectre of Ideology,” in *Mapping Ideology*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London & New York: Verso, 1994): 6. Further page references are in the main text.

fiction [of ideology], that returns in the guise of *spectral apparitions*. (25–26, emphasis added)<sup>108</sup>

Žižek's conclusion gives political profile to Cixous' analysis of the uncanny: "spectrality" is that "which fills out the *unrepresentable* abyss of antagonism, of the non-symbolized real" (26, emphasis added). His analysis can also be read as a politically-engaged reply to Jacques Derrida's spectral deconstruction of Marxist philosophy.

Derrida's thought unpacks binary oppositions based on essentialist ontologies, materialism, and their dialectics.<sup>109</sup> Understandably, his postmodern philosophical skepticism has not sat comfortably with Marxism and its literary corollary, cultural materialism.<sup>110</sup> In *Specters of Marx* (1994), Derrida professes deconstruction's debt to Marxism as a "*radical critique*"—as an emancipatory "procedure ready to undertake its self-critique [...] open to its own transformation."<sup>111</sup> Thus, he proffers deconstruction

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<sup>108</sup> Michel Foucault similarly draws on the Freudian framework of uncanny repression so as to reflect on discursive reconfigurations. He describes the "insurrection of subjugated knowledges" as "the immediate emergence of historical contents [...] that have been buried and disguised." This is the coming to light of knowledges which should have remained hidden because they are "disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: [they are] naive knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity." Foucault describes the result of the disinterment of these knowledges as a "genealogy" which allows us "to establish a historical knowledge of struggles and to make use of this knowledge tactically today," stressing that such genealogies can arise only when "the tyranny of globalizing discourses with their hierarchy and all their privileges [...] [is] eliminated"; Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings 1972–1977*, tr. Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham & Kate Soper, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980): 81–83.

<sup>109</sup> A shorter version of this section on Derrida's conceptualization of spectrality has been previously published in Cornelis Martin Renes, "Spectres of Mudrooroo," *European Journal of English Studies* 15.1 (2011): 45–56.

<sup>110</sup> Tom Lewis, "The Politics of 'Hauntology' in Derrida's *Specters of Marx*," in *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's "Specters of Marx"*, ed. Michael Sprinker (1999; London & New York: Verso, 2008): 134–135.

<sup>111</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, tr. Peggy Kamuf (*Spectres de Marx: l'état de la dette, le*



“as a radicalization [...] *in the tradition* of a certain Marxism, in a certain *spirit of Marxism*” in that its critical textual-analytic approach is “impossible and unthinkable in a pre-Marxist space” (92). Yet, deconstruction questions Marxism as an *ontological* engagement with capitalism and its historical-cultural context, in that it undercuts its own transformative potential by its materialist essentialism.

Derrida deems it “necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction of [...] every concept, beginning with the concepts of being and time” (161). Thus, his oblique politicization of deconstruction as an emancipatory critique of the ontology of presence is fleshed out in what he calls “spectrality,” a counter-discursive “embodiment” of the ghostly that haunts and unsettles dominant politico-economic discourse (32). Since “haunting belongs to the structure of every hegemony” (37), *Specters of Marx* speaks back from the past and takes issue with contemporary conservatives who (wish to) consider Marxism dead and past after the collapse of communism and celebrate the imposition of neoliberalism and late capitalism as the only key to human progress:

It is as though Derrida, in what some call postmodernity, is in the process of diagnosing [...] a present that has already triumphantly exorcised all of its ghosts and believes itself to be without a past and without spectrality, late capitalism itself as ontology, the pure presence of the world-market system freed from all the errors of human history and of previous social formations, including the ghost of Marx himself.<sup>112</sup>

*Specters of Marx's* deconstructionist critique foregrounds how the negation/repression of hitherto unrealized possibilities for social transformation manifests itself as a ghostly discursive gap in our material present. Thus, what emerges from deconstruction's affiliation to a critical Marxist 'spirit' is not the immaterial spirit of an

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*travail du deuil et la nouvelle Internationale*, 1993, London & New York: Routledge, 1994): 88. Further page references are in the main text.

<sup>112</sup>Fredric Jameson, “Marx's Purloined Letter,” in *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's "Specters of Marx"*, ed. Michael Sprinker (1999; London & New York: Verso, 2008): 59.

autonomized idea but “a paradoxical incorporation, the becoming body, a certain phenomenal and carnal form of the spirit” (6) that announces itself but remains as yet unrealized. This *specter*, a terrifying “*revenant* ... because it *begins by coming back*” and thus “is always to come” (11), haunts the material present as an undead past indistinguishable from the “living” future (38–39). The “virtual space” created by spectrality defies the “sharp distinction between the real and the unreal, the actual and the inactual, the living and the non-living, being and non-being” (11). Spectrality therefore redefines the ontology of presence into what Derrida coins a “hauntology” of non-presence that questions the epistemological binaries sustaining traditional Western discourse (51). This points toward an uncanny new humanity beyond straightforward dialectics—beyond Marx’s “critical but pre-deconstructive [...] ontology of presence as actual reality and as objectivity” which recognizes spectrality but aims to exorcize it in a revolutionary gesture (170).

Slavoj Žižek’s Marxist concern with the material bases of oppression/repression engages with what Tom Lewis has called the haunting “absent center of [*Specters of Marx*]: social class.”<sup>113</sup> Whereas Derrida’s argument is informed by the spectral quality of social class and alludes to the suspension of the categorization of labor, race, and gender, Žižek reinserts social antagonism as the uncanny specter that a prevalent ideology’s imperfect representation of reality necessarily calls into being and haunts hegemonic discourse’s very incompleteness. The unrepresentable spectral apparition of ideological/discursive antagonism, which Žižek primarily understands as class struggle, can be extended to include race and gender antagonism. One should not forget that if “class consciousness turns first and foremost around subalternity, that is around the experience of inferiority,”<sup>114</sup> then it should also be understood as “multiracial and multi-gendered” beyond the category of labor only.<sup>115</sup> This may be used to reinscribe the body in a corporal politics of liberation.

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<sup>113</sup> Lewis, “The Politics of ‘Hauntology,’” 149.

<sup>114</sup> Jameson, “Marx’s Purloined Letter,” 47.

<sup>115</sup> Lewis, “The Politics of ‘Hauntology,’” 151.

Within a framework of gay and lesbian theory, Judith Butler develops an understanding of the heterosexual policing of human reproduction through gender identities, its inscriptions on the body, and the possibilities for gender reconfigurations beyond the essentialist restrictions of a “foundationalist reasoning of identity politics.”<sup>116</sup> As such, it slots into Žižek’s analysis as a particularizing critique of discursive formation, and moves beyond traditional dialectics. Her work also adds to Homi Bhabha’s project of “discover[ing] the *uncanny* moment of cultural difference that emerges in the process of enunciation” of a national identity shaped after the (neo)colonizer’s image.<sup>117</sup> Butler applies Foucauldian poststructuralist theory to “the speculative question whether feminist politics can do without a ‘subject’ in the category of women.” She describes the pitfalls of sexual identity politics,

[which] tends to assume that an identity must first be in place in order for political interests to be elaborated and, subsequently, political action to take place. My argument is that there need not be a ‘doer behind the deed,’ but that the ‘doer’ is variably constructed in and through the deed. This is not a return to an existential theory of the self as constructed through its acts, for the existential theory maintains a prediscursive structure for both the self and its acts. It is precisely *the discursively variable construction of each in and through the other* that has interested me [in this study].<sup>118</sup>

By negating its stable prior existence, she claims that the feminist subject position can never be fully described, criticizing a wide range of Western liberatory discourses inspired by Hegel, Marx, Lukács and others; these align “the ‘I’ that confronts its world, including its language, as an object and the ‘I’ that finds itself as an object in that world.” She concludes that, in doing so, Western epistemology

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<sup>116</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York & London: Routledge, 1990): 142.

<sup>117</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, “DissemiNation,” 312, emphasis added.

<sup>118</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 142, emphasis added. Further page references are in the main text.

reproduces the very subject/object dichotomy it aims to overcome. Ultimately, the terms

appropriation, instrumentality, and distantiating germane to the epistemological mode also belong to a strategy of domination that pits the 'I' against an 'Other' and, once that separation is effected, creates an artificial set of questions about the knowability and recoverability of that Other. (144)

Butler proposes a shift from an epistemological account of identity to the *practice of signification* in order to lay bare the ideological apparatus that constitutes the essentialist gender binary. In Butler's view, to understand identity as a signifying practice means to see it as a product of language, and its *articulation* is strategically constituted through *agency*, which in turn operates through the *repetition* of an event rather than through its epistemological invention or founding. Butler assigns a subversive quality to agency because repetition implies "the possibility of variation." To her, the "injunction to be a given gender takes place through discursive routes":

to be a good mother, to be a heterosexually desirable object, to be a fit worker, in sum, to signify a multiplicity of guarantees in response to a variety of different demands all at once. The coexistence or convergence of such injunctions produces the possibility of a complex reconfiguration and redeployment; it is not a transcendental subject who enables action in the midst of such a convergence. (144–145)

Her aim, then, becomes that of locating subversive practices of gender signification as a politics to undo restrictive essentialist dichotomies:

Just as bodily surfaces are enacted *as* the natural, so these surfaces can become the site of a dissonant and denaturalized performance that reveals the performative status of the natural itself.

Butler finds these performative instances in parodical gender behavior such as drag: “there is a subversive laughter in the pastiche-effect of *parodic practices in which the original, the authentic, and the real are themselves constituted as effects*,” destabilizing ‘natural’ notions of heterosexual identity (146, emphasis added). She reasons that taking identity as an effect allows agency to be employed against views that consider categories of gender “foundational and fixed.” She therefore concludes:

for an identity to be an effect means that it is neither fatally constructed nor fully artificial and arbitrary. That the *constituted* status of identity is misconstrued along these two conflicting lines suggests the ways in which the feminist discourse on cultural construction remains trapped within the unnecessary binary of free will and determinism [...] The critical task for feminism is not to establish a point of view outside of constructed identities; that conceit is the construction of an epistemological model that would disavow its own cultural location and, hence, promote itself as a global subject, a position that deploys precisely the imperialist strategies that feminism ought to criticize. The critical task is, rather, to locate strategies of subversive repetition enabled by those constructions, to affirm the *local* possibilities of intervention through participating on precisely those practices of repetition that constitute Identity and, therefore, the immanent possibility of contesting them. (147, emphasis added)

By playing critically with standpoint and (cultural) location, Butler’s performative politics of gender articulation establishes structural connections with micronarratives of an anti-imperial local kind, and as such links up strategically with Homi Bhabha’s investigation of ethnic manifestations of cultural difference in the nation space through colonial mimicry.

In “Of Mimicry and Man,” Bhabha takes a Foucauldian look at the uncanny effects of European civilization on the colonial subject, which “often produces a text rich in the traditions of *trompe l’oeil*, irony, mimicry and repetition” in its attempted constitution of the latter in its Western image. Discursively characterized as

one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge, colonial mimicry appears as the desire for the reformed, recognizable Other, as *a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite [white]*.

Thus, the effective construction of the discourse of mimicry as embodied in the colonial subject is grounded in an unsettling ambivalence that necessarily produces the terms of its own difference through the repetition of the mimicking act.<sup>119</sup> Bhabha links the appearance of this mimic difference to “mockery” that threatens “the civilizing mission [...] by the displacing gaze of its disciplinary double.”

Bhabha’s postcolonizing analysis emulates Butler’s; parodic repetition defies the gendered as well as racial parameters of eurocentric subjectivity, while the rupture of its discourse “transform[s] into an uncertainty which fixes the [...] subject as a ‘partial’ presence.” Bhabha takes this partiality to be both incomplete and virtual, which metamorphoses the mimic colonial subject into the uncanny double of Western subjectivity. This ghost is produced by the repetition of the incomplete mimic act and insistently haunts the faultlines of colonial discourse through “resemblance” as well as an antagonistic “menace” (86) into Žižek’s discursive spectral apparition. Ghostly non-representation is served as follows:

The desire to appear as authentic through mimicry—through a process of writing and repetition—is the final irony of partial representation [...] Mimicry conceals no presence or identity behind its mask [Its] menace [...] is its *double* vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority. (88)

Thus, mimic partial representation defamiliarizes identity from essentialist readings and the uncanny appears at the *political* interstice of “what is known and permissible and that which though known must be kept concealed,” because the problem of

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<sup>119</sup> Bhabha, “DissemiNation,” 86. Further page references are in the main text.

representing difference is not only ontological but also of authority (89).

In defining the *strategic* objectives of the desires underlying colonial mimicry, Bhabha converts partial presence into a subversive “metonymy of presence.” Using the Lacanian notion of mimicry as camouflage, Bhabha constructs the mimic colonial subject as an elusive threat emanating from the strategic production of “identity effects” without a subjacent essence, whose metonymic “*resemblance* is the most terrifying thing to behold” (90). This double is non-representative and empty, announcing not only the death of the Western and colonial subject but also the terms of resistance and reconfiguration. This uncanny ghost defends the possibility of its own corporeality, “necessarily rais[ing] the question of the *authorization* of colonial representations.” In other words, “the fetishized colonial culture is potentially and strategically an insurgent counter-appeal” (91) that embodies the seed for political agency on both the private and public level.

However, Elizabeth Povinelli sees Australian *postcolonial* mimicry embedded in what one might call ‘the Indigenous trap of authentication’. Whereas colonial dynamics urged the colonized to identify with their rulers,

Multicultural postcolonial power seems to work, in contrast, by inspiring subaltern subjects to identify with the impossible object of an authentic self-identity—in the case of indigenous Australians, a domesticated, non-conflictual, ‘traditional’ form of subjectivity. It would be hard to overestimate the impossible demand placed on indigenous subjects within this discursive and performative regime. As the nation stretches out its hands to ancient Aboriginal laws [...] indigenous subjects are called upon to perform an authentic difference in exchange for the good feelings of the nation and the reparative legislation of the state.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Elizabeth A. Povinelli, “The Cunning of Recognition: A Reply to John Frow and Meaghan Morris,” *Critical Inquiry* 25.3 (Spring 1999): 633, emphasis in original.

Povinelli concludes that such a performance of authenticity is nothing but “good theater,” as the requirement for Aborigines to embody a lost past is impossible. In an earlier article, Povinelli had already pointed out

the contradictory demands the law [i.e. Native title legislation] places on Indigenous subjects [which] at once orient their sensual, emotional, and corporeal identities towards the nation’s ideal image of itself as worthy of love and reconciliation and at the same time ghost this *being for the nation*.<sup>121</sup>

This description of the impossible recoverability of the Indigenous sign engages with Cixous’ and Žižek’s haunting politics of nonrepresentation while beckoning toward a reconfiguration of identity beyond its postcolonial ‘death’: that is, beyond its fixation in a nostalgic past, irrecoverable and apolitical. Moreover, it bends Homi Bhabha’s argument on colonial mimicry into a postcolonial enunciation of cultural difference from a mainstream perspective; whereas the colonial moment required an impossible assimilation of Indigeneity to mainstream culture—“unabsorbable difference”<sup>122</sup>—the post/neocolonial era demands its equally unachievable dissimulation, or a disquieting reinscription of earlier essentialist strategies that aimed to ensure Australia’s modernity.

Therefore, a search for and establishment of an immanent Indigenous subjectivity would subjugate the very group it seeks to free from an oppressive racist discourse to the essentialist trap of identity politics.<sup>123</sup> However, an investigation into the *performance* of

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<sup>121</sup> Povinelli, “The State of Shame,” 580, emphasis in original. I take her use of ‘to ghost’ discursively: as a reference to the Aboriginal sign haunting the national self-definition and to the impossibility of its representation as a true essence.

<sup>122</sup> Gunew, *Haunted Nations*, 100.

<sup>123</sup> Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 86. He warns against reinscriptions of a totalizing discourse, because “is it not perhaps the case that these fragments of genealogies are no sooner brought to light, that the particular elements of the knowledge that one seeks to disinter are no sooner accredited and put into circulation, than they run the risk of re-codification, re-colonization?” For “genealogy,” see footnote 107 in this chapter.



the sign Indigenous in the political and cultural arena of Australia would lay bare the political and legal mechanisms that determine the parameters of its strategic employment, and reinstate a notion of *agency* that confers a postcolonizing impulse. Thus, the meeting of Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures within the postcolonial nation space must be considered a territory in which racial affiliations interrogate and rearticulate the ethnic as well as gender in productive overlaps with class, parameters that are effectively “haunted” by “the spectre of Truganini.”<sup>124</sup> Such an interrogation, in turn, leads to uncanny *performative interventions* in the race, class, and gender features of Australianness, in which literature as social intervention “plays its own shifty role.”<sup>125</sup>

### Australian Literature

If, according to Homi Bhabha, the colonial book long ago lost its representational authority,<sup>126</sup> then, in the articulation of postcolonial Australian identity, writing is strategically employed as social intervention by questioning the latter’s fixity. According to the cultural-materialist critic Alan Sinfield, who writes from a gay background, “Literary practices are not ideologically neutral (very little is): they are part of the apparatus through which people

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<sup>124</sup> Attwood, *In the Age of Mabo*, xxx. Bain Attwood quotes from Bernie Smith’s ABC Boyer lecture “The Spectre of Truganini” (Sydney 1981). Truganini was, reputedly, the last surviving full-blood Tasmanian Aboriginal woman, and plays an important role in Mudrooroo’s *Master* series. See also Greg Lehman, “Trukanini,” in *The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture*, ed. Sylvia Kleinert & Margo Neale (Melbourne: Oxford UP, 2000): 722. Lehman describes her as an “icon of survival” for Aboriginal Tasmanians, whereas non-Indigenes generally consider her a “symbol of the extinction of a race.” Furthermore, she is “cherished by today’s Tasmanian Aboriginal community as a woman who displayed strength and diplomacy in her struggle to find a way for her people to endure the savage impact of Europeans on her land.”

<sup>125</sup> I play on Sneja Gunew’s understanding of the terms of postcolonial nation-building. See Gunew, *Haunted Nations*, 29.

<sup>126</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” in Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994): 92.

demarcate their identities within society.”<sup>127</sup> Thus, Sneja Gunew claims that the Australian literary canon vaunts a totalizing discourse, combining liberal-humanist readings of cultural history with Leavisite literary criticism, and asserting a British origin for Australian culture.<sup>128</sup>

The birth of self-reflexive Australian literary criticism is marked by white nationalist views which hold that national, post-colony culture can only differentiate itself by mediating the uniqueness of the landscape. As “‘the’ land itself w[ould] speak through and in an authentic Australian literature” (99), it would automatically break away from the British colonial paradigm. Until the 1970s, this agenda of locating “cultural closures” in natural features produced a literary canon of mainly traditional realist texts, firmly rooted in a male Anglo-Celtic culture that impeded not only the articulation of race and ethnicity but also gender to speak through the land (103). Literature has played its own, questionable role in the construction of a whitewashed Australian identity, and the bushranger has functioned as the measure of true and real Australianness in the literary canon.<sup>129</sup> Gunew makes a telling reference to the pioneer literary magazine *The Bulletin*, whose celebration of the bush myth

reveals the racism and misogyny contained in the influential journal [...] to be the flipside of its espousal of nationalism. Scarcely any women, or writers from non-Anglo-Celtic background figure in this construction of the cultural public sphere. (107)

Gunew asserts that the most ‘authentic’ mediation of the Australian land in literature is necessarily established through Indigenous voices. Indeed, Australian cultural history has largely been rewritten throughout the 1990s and 2000s by including the Indigene,<sup>130</sup> but the competing paradigms of genocide and benign settlement have turned the academic field of history into another battlefield where

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<sup>127</sup> Sinfield, “Introduction,” 6.

<sup>128</sup> Gunew, “Denaturalizing cultural nationalisms,” 100–101. Further page references are in the main text.

<sup>129</sup> Hodge & Mishra, *Dark Side of the Dream*, xv.

<sup>130</sup> Lorenzo Veracini, “Of a ‘contested ground’ and an ‘indelible stain,’” 226.

the authorization of Indigenous voices and versions is the bone of contention.<sup>131</sup> As “Aboriginal history and [white] ‘invasion’ finally came to be the issues around which a further renegotiation of Australia’s identity and relation to the past were to be elaborated,”<sup>132</sup> they also refocused literary criticism into a contested ground of competing cultural discourses. Mudrooroo made a considerable contribution to rewriting mainstream versions of literary history in his essays, whatever his current status as a non-Indigene. He testified to the impact of the new historical, legal, and political developments by rewriting his groundbreaking<sup>133</sup> study of Indigenous literature *Writing from the Fringe* (1990) into *Milli Milli Wangka* (1997). In a broader sense, there has been a reassessment of the literary canon by the incorporation not only of Indigenous but also of women’s writing, while the inclusion of ethnic writing should even further recast an Australianness which is seen as problematically Christian, white, British, and male.<sup>134</sup> Ultimately, Gunew sees multiculturalism as a productive counter public sphere in the debate on culture and literature whenever texts are deployed

in such a way that they could not be easily recuperated in the name of nostalgia or absorbed into an Anglo-Celtic canon [This] undoes the secular/sacred closures of cultural histories and canons, *confounding* those who believe that the land speaks [...] literary nationalism.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>131</sup>In the new millennium, the conservative (lay) historian Keith Windschuttle sparked off the so-called ‘History Wars’ launching a frontal attack on the New Australian History with his volume *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History* (2002), to which Robert Manne’s collection *Whitewash* (2003) and Bain Attwood’s in-depth analysis of Windschuttle’s work in *Telling the Truth about Aboriginal History* (2005), among others, responded.

<sup>132</sup>Veracini, “Of a ‘contested ground,’” 230.

<sup>133</sup>See Paul Sharrad, “Beyond Capricornia: Alexis Wright’s ambiguous promise” (EACLALS Conference, Ca’ Foscari, Venice, 25–29 March 2008): 15, endnote ii. Sharrad holds that “Whatever we may think of Mudrooroo, he was the leading thinker on Aboriginal writing for some time, and his *Writing from the Fringe* must remain a seriously considered study of the field.”

<sup>134</sup>Gunew, “Denaturalizing cultural nationalisms,” 114.

<sup>135</sup>“Denaturalizing cultural nationalisms,” 116, emphasis added.

In such a promiscuous confusion, the uncanny plays an instrumental role.

Elleke Boehmer's assessment of postcolonial writing points out that indigenous writers adapt culture-specific items to white literary conventions with the purpose of othering mainstream readership. By "using techniques and vocabulary they might find unfamiliar," they establish a distinctly indigenous realm of experience.<sup>136</sup> These postcolonizing adaptations function as *literary* metonyms of presence that function as an "insurgent counter-appeal,"<sup>137</sup> so that "what emerges between mimesis and mimicry is a *writing*" that defies eurocentric history.<sup>138</sup> Put into a plain Australian perspective,

although Aborigines do narrate stories which tell of colonists slaying Aborigines, they also relate how their forebears outwitted their adversaries by bushcraft, trickery or magic and thus denied the wish-fulfilment of that hegemonic narrative which decreed Aborigines were 'dying out'.<sup>139</sup>

Here, the undead Indigenous specter signals the demise of a Western metanarrative imperfectly reproduced in the Australian context, haunting what the "eminent" Australian anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner called 'the great Australian silence.'<sup>140</sup> Postcolonial writing tends to make use of the Fantastic so as to "dramatize split perceptions of postcolonial cultures" and denounce enduring eurocentric essentialism. Ultimately, postcolonial authors insist upon "redreaming" their land by confounding "the bizarre and the plausible," and Indigenous Australian texts re-Dream country to the point that strangeness and unfamiliarity become "*untranslatable*," making the text inaccessible.<sup>141</sup> Thus, Boehmer's analysis activates

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<sup>136</sup> Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*, 230.

<sup>137</sup> Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man," 91.

<sup>138</sup> "Of Mimicry and Man," 87-88.

<sup>139</sup> Attwood, *In the Age of Mabo*, xix-xx.

<sup>140</sup> Quoted in *In the Age of Mabo*, xiv. Stanner referred to the complete absence of the Indigenous Australian in contemporary Australian historiography as practiced by mainstream scholars.

<sup>141</sup> Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*, 242-243.

the uncanny and takes it into the political, inasmuch as literary features denote a decolonizing agenda.

In short, Indigenous Australian literary expression tends to defy the monolithic Western closure of reality and the essentialist race, gender, and class dichotomies that support it. In South American literature, the incorporation of 'fantastic' elements from a non-Western universe into everyday reality has given rise to the coinage 'Magical Realism'. Mimicking the colonial penchant for "fantasy and exaggeration to describe new worlds," the genre employs the illusory to propose imaginary yet conceivable worlds that "expose the extremities of the neo-colonial condition."<sup>142</sup> The term has also been applied to Indigenous Australian fiction, to address the Secret-Sacred in "dreamtime narrative,"<sup>143</sup> but is arguably a misnomer. Elsewhere I wrote to this effect:

*Realism*, the true and faithful representation of reality in fiction, would comfortably connect the mainstream reader to the novelistic genre's 19th-century essence, whereas *Magic* would allow an easy incorporation of those elements that may be described as exotic to, yet not surpassing such representations. In other words, the compound noun seeks to make an Aboriginal realm of knowledge digestible to mainstream readership by safely encapsulating it within the fantastic [...] <sup>144</sup>

While Mudrooroo suggested the alternative Maban Reality,<sup>145</sup> his current status of ostracization in Indigenous studies and literature hampers its effective use. 'Uncanny Realism' may feel more adequate to express the inaccessibility of the Indigenous-Australian universe to Western readers, as it points toward a Freudian process of defamiliarization while at the same time indicating that its

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<sup>142</sup> *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*, 242.

<sup>143</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Frances Devlin-Glass & Lyn McCredden, *Intimate Horizons* (Adelaide, SA: ATF Press, 2009): 205–242.

<sup>144</sup> Cornelis Martin Renes, "Discomforting Readings: Uncanny Perceptions of Self in Alexis Wright's *Plains of Promise* and David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon*," *Eucalypt* 2 (2002): 78–79.

<sup>145</sup> See Chapter 3. A maban is an Aboriginal 'wise man' or shaman.

manifestation and presence is absolutely normal to Indigenous eyes.<sup>146</sup> Nevertheless, Indigenous characters in such fiction are equally dislocated, unsettled, and alienated, searching for their place in the world. This lack of situatedness signals the postcolonial as active process rather than state, which prompts the Indigenous scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson to write of the incommensurable differences in the positionality of Australia's First Nations and settlers:

Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples are situated in relation to (post)colonisation in radically different ways—ways that cannot be made into sameness. There may well be spaces in Australia that could be described as postcolonial but these are not spaces inhabited by Indigenous people. It may be more useful, therefore, to conceptualise the current condition not as postcolonial but as *postcolonising* with the associations of ongoing process which that implies.<sup>147</sup>

She concludes that the “coloniser/colonised axis” remains active

through power relations that are premised on our dispossession and resisted through our ontological relationship to land. Indigenous people's position within the nation state is not one where colonising power relations have been discontinued.<sup>148</sup>

Indigenous-Australian literature engages with this postcolonizing process in particular ways, investigating the tense field of received notions of Indigeneity/Australianness and self-definition through the activation of the Indigenous Secret-Sacred. Alexis Wright has playfully juxtaposed the term Aboriginal Reality with Magical Realism and Maban Reality, and the reception of her first novel, *Plains of Promise* (1997) testifies to the idiosyncracies of new Indigenous-Australian writing (see chapter 5). This is a valid, elegant

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<sup>146</sup> Renes, “Discomforting Readings,” 78–79.

<sup>147</sup> Moreton-Robinson, “I Still Call Australia Home’,” 30.

<sup>148</sup> “I Still Call Australia Home’,” 37.

solution to the issue and also shows an indebtedness to the groundwork that Mudrooroo laid. Descriptive of literary output that performs new inscriptions of Australian Indigeneity from an Indigenous standpoint by activating the uncanny Secret-Sacred interface of Indigenous and non-Indigenous epistemologies as a performative site of identity, it is only fitting that such a term should have been coined by an Indigenous Australian author.

I will employ the term Aboriginal Reality<sup>149</sup> to acknowledge Indigenous Australian fiction as a subversive location where uncanny manifestations of race, class, and gender are in constant dialogue, redefining identities against essentialist mainstream positions. The following chapters will discuss the extent to which texts can be considered instances of Aboriginal Reality, in that, within a political agenda of cultural difference, they perform a de-essentializing rearticulation of the Indigenous corpus into the Australian multiculturalist land- and textscape. They aim to flesh out Stephen Muecke's argument:

the renegotiation of subject positions, the definition of context and reading and ways of rethinking the idea of 'the book' are all part of a contemporary literary aesthetic in which Aboriginal writing plays a leading part.<sup>150</sup>

In a similar vein, the Indigenous scholar Michael Dodson insists that Aboriginal Australians must have control over the representation of their identities, and must resist assimilation to mainstream culture. He points out that the wide variety of expressions of contemporary Indigeneity and therefore the impossibility of fixing Indigeneity in a single, reductive identitarian niche conform with a position of

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<sup>149</sup> At the 2013 ASAL conference in Wagga Wagga, Australia, the Wiradjuri author and academic Jeanine Leane mentioned that she had heard Alexis Wright use the term Aboriginal Reality as a more appropriate description than Magical Realism or Maban Reality. As I analyze Indigenous Australian literature as a form of postcolonizing Dreaming narrative so as to refer to the dynamic, performative nature of contemporary Aboriginal writing, I have respectfully adopted Wright's nomenclature as an adequate generic denomination.

<sup>150</sup> Stephen Muecke, "Aboriginal Literature and the Repressive Hypothesis," *Southerly* 4 (1988): 418.

strength and resistance in line with the right to self-definition and self-determination. Ultimately, Indigenous voices must speak their own languages, as “without our own voices, Aboriginality will continue to be a creation for and about us.”<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Michael Dodson, “The end in the beginning: re(de)finding Aboriginality” (1994), in *Blacklines: Contemporary Critical Writing by Indigenous Australians*, ed. Michèle Grossman (Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne UP, 2003): 39.



## 2

### The Uncertain Location of Sally Morgan's *(My) Place*

"I don't know what I would be doing now if I hadn't made those connections. I'd be pretty screwed up, I think"<sup>1</sup>

#### Mainstream Comfort

Sally Morgan's *My Place* (1987) forms part of a tradition of auto/biographies in Australian literature describing the lives of 'ordinary Australians', which in the case of Indigenous women writers would take definitive shape as of the late 1970s. Morgan's auto/biography would far surpass the success of a host of other autobiographical narrations written in the 1980s, going down as a "landmark text"<sup>2</sup> in Indigenous Australian literature. It has maintained that reputation until today, as national sales over 500,000 copies within a decade of its publication, widespread distribution in English and non-English-speaking countries,<sup>3</sup> and long-lasting critical interest have shown.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sally Morgan, quoted in Delys Bird & Dennis Haskell, "Interview with Sally Morgan," in *Whose Place? A Study of Sally Morgan's "My Place"*, ed. Delys Bird & Dennis Haskell (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1992): 20-21.

<sup>2</sup> Joan Newman, "Race, Gender and Identity: *My Place* as Autobiography," in *Whose Place? A Study of Sally Morgan's "My Place"*, ed. Delys Bird & Dennis Haskell (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1992): 66.

<sup>3</sup> Victoria Laurie, "An Interview with Sally Morgan," [www.unionsverlag.com](http://www.unionsverlag.com) (23 October 1999), [http://www.unionsverlag.com/info/link.asp?link\\_id=6000&pers\\_id=91&pic=../p-ortrait/MorganSally.jpg&tit=Sally%20Morgan](http://www.unionsverlag.com/info/link.asp?link_id=6000&pers_id=91&pic=../p-ortrait/MorganSally.jpg&tit=Sally%20Morgan) (accessed 10 June 2005).

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Sheila Collingwood-Whittick, "Re-presenting the Australian Aborigine," 110-131; Jackie Huggins, "Always was always will be," 60-65; and Michèle Grossman, "Risk, Roguery and Revelation," *Australian Literary Review* 1.2 (October 2006): 10, <http://infoweb.newsbank.com/iw->

Whereas mainstream reception was unequivocally positive and sealed its commercial success, *My Place* would soon show its uncanny location in the Australian literary panorama.<sup>5</sup> Precisely because of its smooth acceptance by non-Indigenous Australians, a series of critical questions would be raised as to the text's articulation of Indigeneity and the relationship it proposed to white Australia. These disturbing questions about racial identity would strategically link up with class and gender issues, since Sally Morgan described the circumstances of her life as a woman on the poor urban fringe of Perth—its suburb of Manning<sup>6</sup>—and was seen to benefit professionally and socially from the success of her book,<sup>7</sup> a critique that saw its uncanny déjà vu in Mudrooroo's identity trouble some years later. The following will analyze how Sally Morgan rewrote race, class, gender, and genre in order to dis-cover her Indigenous descent, with a particular interest in the activation of the Aboriginal Secret-Sacred and uncanny notions of identity in the negotiation of autobiographical realism and oral narrative.

*My Place's* publication in 1987 coincided with the preparations of the 1988 Bicentennial celebrations of the white discovery and settlement of Australia, "counter-observed publicly by a great many Indigenous Australians as Invasion Day."<sup>8</sup> Under pressure of Indigenous protest movements, a "collective bad conscience" and "white guilt" regarding the Australia's Indigenous population had become more prominent.<sup>9</sup> The new political awareness was also shaped by the work of the *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in*

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search/we/InfoWeb?p\_product=AWNB&p\_theme=aggregated5&p\_action=doc&p\_docid=1148A0D9851BE068&p\_docnum=1&p\_queryname=16 (accessed 9 September 2008).

<sup>5</sup> For example, the only comprehensive study edited on *My Place* bears the ambiguous title *Whose Place?*

<sup>6</sup> See Bird & Haskell, "Interview with Sally Morgan," 7. Morgan defines herself as "poor working class" in her youth.

<sup>7</sup> Huggins, "Always was always will be," 64.

<sup>8</sup> Michèle Grossman, "Introduction: After Aboriginalism: power, knowledge, and Indigenous Australian critical writing," in *Blacklines: Contemporary Critical Writing by Indigenous Australians*, ed. Michèle Grossman (1994; Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne UP, 2003): 2.

<sup>9</sup> Wenche Ommundsen, "Engendering the Bicentennial Reader: Sally Morgan, Mark Henshaw and the Critics," *SPAN* 36 (October 1993): 252.

*Custody* (1987–91), which published an influential report on deaths of incarcerated Indigenous Australians. While it was not conclusive on police violence, the commission found Indigenous-inmates extremely overrepresented in the total prison population and traumatically linked to the policies of mixed-descent child removal imposed on Indigenous families in the period 1930–70.<sup>10</sup> This episode of the country's hidden racist past was subsequently addressed in the official investigation into the Stolen Generations<sup>11</sup> and fleshed out in the *Bringing Them Home* report of 1997. It concluded that one to three out of ten children were forcibly removed from their Indigenous families and communities, so that "not one Indigenous family has escaped the effects of forcible removal."<sup>12</sup>

Sally Morgan's family was no exception to this assimilation policy and Morgan's autobiographical search for her Indigenous past became embedded in a wider discussion of Australianness, "touch[ing] at a raw nerve of the national consciousness."<sup>13</sup> The absorptionist and assimilationist periods 1930–70 strongly repressed Indigenous literary expression,<sup>14</sup> but

Aboriginal women's autobiographies [...] have had a marked effect on reversing white cultural amnesia and have demonstrated Benedict Anderson's dictum that a country's biography, "because it cannot be 'remembered,' must be narrated."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Kathy Whimp, *Final Report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody: A Summary* (Reconciliation and Social Justice Library, 1996), [http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/special/rsjproject/rsjlibrary/rciadic/rciadic\\_summary/](http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/special/rsjproject/rsjlibrary/rciadic/rciadic_summary/) (accessed 17 July 2007); Rosemary Neill, *White Out: How Politics Is Killing Black Australia* (Crow's Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2002): 146, 227.

<sup>11</sup> The term was given wide currency by the work of the historian Peter Read.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Anna Haebich, *Broken Circles*, 15.

<sup>13</sup> Ommundsen, "Engendering the Bicentennial Reader," 251.

<sup>14</sup> Jodie Brown, "Unmaking White Myths: Your Laws, My Place," in *Whose Place? A Study of Sally Morgan's "My Place"*, ed. Delys Bird & Dennis Haskell (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1992): 23.

<sup>15</sup> Anne Brewster, "An Uneasy Truce? Aboriginal Women's Autobiography in the Arena of Postcolonial Studies," *SPAN* 36 (1993), <http://www.she.murdoch.edu.au/cntinuum/litserve/SPAN/34/Brewster.html>

*My Place* fed into and profited from this raised mainstream awareness at its very moment of publication. Edward Hills argues that autobiography builds a strong relationship between the individual subject and socialization, which facilitates a critique of the forces that shape a subject's identity. Thus, he claims that "Sally Morgan's [...] personal story provides powerful opportunities for rewriting history, and reconstructing cultural identities."<sup>16</sup>

*My Place*, since it glossed over present injustices while projecting its anger toward the past,<sup>17</sup> is locked in the past because white consequences for her. She had been instructed by her mother to tell her classmates she was Indian,<sup>18</sup> which "the kids could accept" <sup>18</sup> "white lie" and explains why the void Sally felt as a poor suburban 'immigrants'19's. Thus, *My Place* digs into the all too common "deceit" of 'passing': Sally's 'half-cast' grandmother Nan and racial legislation white li(f)e in post, locked into a self-defeating circle of shame, and silence about their roots. Thus, says Sally, "I feel embarrassed now, to think that, once, I wanted to be white."<sup>21</sup> locked into a self-defeating circle of shame, fear, and silence about their Indigenous roots. Thus, says Sally, "I feel embarrassed now, to think that, once, I wanted to be white."<sup>23</sup>

The process of Indigenous recovery was, to Sally, a question of discovering the unknown rather than coming to terms with the known,

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(accessed 10 July 2006). She quotes from Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 204, emphasis added.

<sup>16</sup> Edward Hills, "What Country, Friends, Is This?": Sally Morgan's *My Place* Revisited," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 32.2 (1997): 99.

<sup>17</sup> Ommundsen, "Engendering the Bicentennial Reader," 255.

<sup>18</sup> Sally Morgan, *My Place* (1987; London: Virago, 1988): 38.

<sup>19</sup> Mary Wright, "A fundamental question of identity: An interview with Sally Morgan," *Kunapipi* 10.1-2 (1998): 92-97. Mudrooroo's 'flawed identity' could be equally seen as the result of a white lie—see Chapter 3.

<sup>20</sup> Morgan, *My Place*, 106.

<sup>21</sup> Marcia Langton, "Well, I heard it on the radio and I saw it on the television...", 29.

<sup>22</sup> The 1905 Western Australian *Aboriginal Protection Act* and its corollaries had empowered the federal state to take children of mixed descent from their Aboriginal mothers and its corollaries had empowered the federal state to take children of mixed descent from their Aboriginal mothers.

<sup>23</sup> Morgan, *My Place*, 305.

which would correspond to Nan's inscription in the family's silenced history. The received character of Sally's displacement offered her the chance to maintain sufficient distance for optimism:

We had more insight into [Nan's] bitterness. And more than anything, we wanted her to change, to be proud of what she was. We'd seen so much of her and ourselves in the people we'd met. We belonged now. We wanted her to belong, too.<sup>24</sup>

This optimism about cultural belonging would allow white readers of *My Place* to shed responsibility for the Indigenous plight because it enabled them "to envisage a time when such guilt had ceased to dominate their national consciousness."<sup>25</sup> In such a reading, the Indigenous ghost that haunted the nation's past would turn out to be appeasing, and this would explain the great success of *My Place* over comparable auto/biographical works by Indigenous authors describing "despair, devastation, loss, poverty, infant mortality, [and] high imprisonment." While *My Place* was hailed by mainstream readers, in Indigenous communities its reception was controversial.<sup>26</sup> The matter of representability was less clear-cut than it seemed to be.

### **Critical Discomfort**

As of the late 1970s, Indigenous life writing had been heartily embraced by Indigenous women as an apt genre to give testimony of race and gender oppression in Australia.<sup>27</sup> *My Place*, a female instance of life writing carried out along matrilineal lines, was cushioned by feminist mainstream support, which "endorsed and

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<sup>24</sup> *My Place*, 234.

<sup>25</sup> Ommundsen, "Engendering the Bicentennial Reader," 255.

<sup>26</sup> See, for instance, Huggins, "Always was always will be," 60–65, and Sonja Kurtzer, "Wandering Girl: who defines 'authenticity' in Aboriginal literature?" (1998), in *Blacklines: Contemporary Critical Writing by Indigenous Australians*, ed. Michèle Grossman (Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne UP, 2003): 187.

<sup>27</sup> Arlene A. Elder, "Silence as Expression: Sally Morgan's *My Place*," *Kunapipi* 14.1 (1992): 16.

revalued feminine subjectivity” in response to mainstream politics of op/repression,<sup>28</sup> and universalized and subsumed woman’s experience under the common marker of patriarchal oppression.<sup>29</sup> The matrilineal aspect of *My Place* is grounded in the frontier custom of white male settlers relieving their sexual urge with ‘black velvet’,<sup>30</sup> and the politics of separation, assimilation, and shame meant that the white paternal line was generally silenced and lost.<sup>31</sup> Any genealogical search, therefore, is first and foremost anchored in tracing the female Indigenous forebears. Moreover, in Sally’s family the white great-grandfather presumably committed incest and was therefore at pains to hide his biological traces, which led to Sally’s mother’s separation from her mother. Thus, contemporary feminist readers would respond not only to this bildungsroman’s successful quest for female subject formation but also to the uncovering of the unspeakable racial-patriarchal violence perpetrated against the older women in the text.

Nevertheless, the initial feminist response to *My Place* obscured the racial problematic of what white Australia was willing to accept as ‘authentic’ Indigenous-Australian stories.<sup>32</sup> So, soon more disquieting readings of the textual articulation of Morgan’s Indigenous identity and the way it affected (white) reader positioning were produced.<sup>33</sup> Judith Brett’s opinion in the *Australian*

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<sup>28</sup> Stephen Muecke, “Aboriginal Literature and the Repressive Hypothesis,” 409.

<sup>29</sup> Aileen Moreton-Robinson, “Tiddas Talkin’ Up to the White Woman: When Huggins et al. Took On Bell,” in *Blacklines: Contemporary Critical Writing by Indigenous Australians*, ed. Michèle Grossman (Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne UP, 2003): 69.

<sup>30</sup> The politically incorrect term for the sexual availability of Aboriginal women to white males in earlier settler days; see Collingwood-Whittick, “Re-presenting the Australian Aborigine,” 53. Sally’s grandmother’s personal experience testifies to this custom: “Now there was plenty of stockmen up north, then, and they all wanted girls”; see *My Place*, 328.

<sup>31</sup> The custom was quietly understood, silenced and/or ignored in the mainstream; consequently, the rather uninhibited treatment of ‘black velvet’ in Xavier Herbert’s novel *Capricornia* (1938; London: HarperCollins, 2008) caused a scandal after its publication in 1938.

<sup>32</sup> Kurtzer, “*Wandering Girl*: who defines ‘authenticity?’” 183.

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Muecke, “Aboriginal Literature and the Repressive Hypothesis”; Newman, “Race, Gender and Identity”; Hills, “‘What Country, Friends, Is This?’”;

*Book Review* was symptomatic of the comforting empathy the novel had raised in white readers:

Because these oral narratives are framed by Sally's need to know about her family's past, they have a tremendous dignity. *I felt none of the unease* about the relationship between the teller and the stranger/recorder, no matter how well-meaning, which I've so often felt when reading collected oral material [...] this book's debt to Indigenous story-telling traditions positions the reader as a receiver of gifts more explicitly than most.<sup>34</sup>

This "gift" of "forgiveness" and "remarkable lack of bitterness" leads Brett to the conclusion that white denialism is the source of problems; thus, she places the solution to these racist problems in the hands of those who are suffering from them most: "many Aborigines have a far greater understanding than most white Australians of what is needed to free this society from the guilt of the past."<sup>35</sup> Her acknowledgement is therefore hardly disinterested. Brett supports her assessment with the following scene from the book. Once Sally establishes family connections in the Pilbara district of Northwestern Australia, a 'full blood' Aboriginal Australian confesses: "You don't know what it means, no one comes back. You don't know what it means that you, with light skin, want to own us."<sup>36</sup> In this troubling reversal of acceptance into the Indigenous community, Indigeneity reaches out to the I-persona (and reader) and causes the verb 'to own' to take on a colonial meaning. Such demands on the part of the oppressed for compassion enable white readers to position themselves favorably toward a non-threatening politics of Indigenous assimilation to the mainstream.<sup>37</sup>

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Huggins, "Always was always will be"; and Grossman, "Risk, Roguery and Revelation."

<sup>34</sup> Judith Brett, "Breaking the Silence: A gift to the reader," *Australian Book Review* (August 1987): 10 (emphasis added).

<sup>35</sup> Brett, "Breaking the Silence," 10–11.

<sup>36</sup> "Breaking the Silence," 10; Brett quotes from *My Place*, 228–229.

<sup>37</sup> This led Mudrooroo to dismissing Morgan's text. See Chapter 3.

The non-Indigenous academic Stephen Muecke was suspicious of the “ease of acceptance” with which white reviewers and critics read the book.<sup>38</sup> According to Muecke, Morgan’s Indigenous ‘authenticity’ had not only been mediated for mainstreamers by the confessional truthfulness the autobiographical genre purportedly projects but also by a wide variety of mainstream filters. These took the shape of Christianity, New Age spirituality, and ‘well-meaning whites’—an encouraging friend, an understanding publisher, supportive reviewers<sup>39</sup>—which would all facilitate non-Indigenous assimilation of the text’s historical and political implications. Muecke takes a Foucauldian approach<sup>40</sup> by asserting that definitions of Indigeneity<sup>41</sup> are inscribed in anthropological, medical, and legal discursive fields beyond which it is difficult for Aborigines to establish their authenticity. Muecke’s poststructuralist proposal is to understand the novel not as “a place where the desire to speak [the truth about Indigeneity] is liberated [but] as a site of multiple constraints

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<sup>38</sup> Muecke published his oft-cited essay “Aboriginal Literature and the Repressive Hypothesis” in 1988.

<sup>39</sup> Muecke, “Aboriginal Literature and the Repressive Hypothesis,” 415–416. Apart from Judith Brett, see Nene Gare, “Review of *My Place*,” *Westerly* 3 (1987): 80–81, and Nancy Keesing’s cover note to the 1987 edition. Keesing wrote that the book was “as compelling and as impossible to put down as a detective story, but unlike that genre, it is deeply informed with life and truth” (quoted in Wright, “A fundamental question of identity,” 94). Note that Gare wrote the novel *The Fringe Dwellers* (1961; Melbourne, Sun, 1966), which inspired the eponymous film directed by Bruce Beresford (1986), a film that became famous for being one of the first to have an Aboriginal cast for the lead roles.

<sup>40</sup> “Aboriginal Literature and the Repressive Hypothesis,” 407. Muecke adapts “repressive hypothesis” from its use in Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1: *An Introduction*, tr. Robert Hurley (*Histoire de la sexualité*, 1976, tr. 1978 New York: Vintage, 1990): 10–12, to mean the impossibility for Aborigines to address repression outside Enlightenment discourses that conceive of freedom as mutually liberatory to the oppressed and the oppressor, obscuring the persistence of the social conditions that caused oppression in the first place.

<sup>41</sup> See Langton, “Well, I heard it on the radio,” 28. Marcia Langton quotes the legal scholar John McCorquodale (*Aborigines and the Law: A Digest* [Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1987]), who found 67 definitions for Aborigines in the legal sphere, all relating to their status as ward of the state or inmate.



pertaining both to form and contextual relations,"<sup>42</sup> adding that their identification may help to understand how meaning and identity are (re)negotiated beyond an essentialist Indigenous subject position in the text. Similarly, Marcia Langton notes that most white Australians construct images of Indigeneity through colonialist stereotypes rather than through actual contact with Indigenes. Furthermore, any renegotiation of representation takes place in a discursive field in which stereotypes are strategically inserted and problematize communication.<sup>43</sup>

So, has Morgan's text achieved an articulation of Indigeneity that goes anywhere beyond an essentialist notion of bloodlines? If not, truth would become genetic truth rather than social practice, and Indigeneity inscribed in stifling immutability rather than in a performative field of subject positions. Thus, Marcia Langton points out that nowadays the federal definition of Indigeneity is reliant upon the Australian High Court's opinion, which, in times of Mabo, valorizes the social over the biological: Aboriginal Australians are those who descend from Aborigines, identify as Aboriginal, and are recognized as such by the Aboriginal community they live in. Indigenous people themselves generally reject the eugenicist definitions from the assimilationist period and opt for the High Court's more balanced three-way approach, but Langton understands that *My Place's* narrative and publication success show that establishing Indigeneity is still not an easy, politically uninformed matter, but may lead to a mainstream whitewashing of postcolonial guilt:

Morgan 'found' her 'Indigeneity' in adulthood, by suspecting a deceit. One wonders what the appeal was to such a large readership. Perhaps Morgan assuages the guilt of whites,

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<sup>42</sup> Muecke, "Aboriginal Literature and the Repressive Hypothesis," 417. See also Hills, "What Country, Friends, Is This?" 100. Hills takes Ruby Langford's memoirs *Don't Take Your Love to Town* (Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin, 1988) as an example to explain how publication for a large mainstream market is subject to "publishing, funding, historical, political [...], literary and linguistic conventions," which harbors the danger of erasing subversive content so as not to offend mainstream feelings.

<sup>43</sup> Langton, "Well, I heard it on the radio," 33-35.

especially white women, who were complicit in the assimilation programme and the deception into which families like the Morgans felt they were forced? After all, Sally turned out to be a fine young lady, didn't she?

Worse still, Langton suggests that white readership could easily buy into their own presumed Indigeneity through Morgan's autobiography:

Or could the attraction be [...] that *My Place* raises the possibility that the reader might also find, with a little sleuthing in the family tree, an Aboriginal ancestor [...] thus acquir[ing] the genealogical, even biological ticket [...] to enter the world of 'primitivism.'<sup>44</sup>

The crucial objection here is that Morgan moved from a non-Indigenous to an Indigenous identity in *adulthood*. While she explains on several occasions how she always felt different as a child<sup>45</sup>—Homi Bhabha's "the same, but not quite"<sup>46</sup>—the final revelation does not come until adolescence: "for the first time in my fifteen years, I was conscious of Nan's colouring."<sup>47</sup> Thus, the first third of the novel almost reads like any suburban person's life in Australia and impressed the Indigenous critic Jackie Huggins as "the life of a middle-class Anglo woman."<sup>48</sup> While this structurally works to package the secret and surprise effect contained in the story,<sup>49</sup> it also reveals Sally's insertion in the mainstream, and the effectiveness of the politics of assimilation both as external and internal pressure on identity formation. Thus, the politics of fear, shame, and silence operate on two, mutually reinforcing levels: the resistance to retrieving a collective history of oppression, hitherto unknown, and the difficulty of articulating an individual identity, hitherto repressed.

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<sup>44</sup> Langton, "Well, I heard it on the radio", 29–30.

<sup>45</sup> *My Place*, 26, 86.

<sup>46</sup> Bhabha, "DissemiNation," 86.

<sup>47</sup> *My Place*, 97.

<sup>48</sup> Huggins, "Always was always will be," 62.

<sup>49</sup> Collingwood-Whittick, "Re-presenting the Australian Aborigine," 43.

So, what role does authenticity play in such an ambiguous context of feeling and resistance in and toward the novel? The Indigenous scholar Sonja Kurtzer holds that *My Place* reveals the limits of what mainstream Australian readers were willing to accept as authentic Indigeneity,<sup>50</sup> and Jackie Huggins wonders why *My Place* had become “such an exclusively ‘holy’ text about Aboriginal life in Australia” and had been celebrated as “the only experience told of Aboriginal life” to date.<sup>51</sup> If Sally Morgan’s configuration of Indigeneity is debatable, where does that leave the hybrid victims of the absorption and assimilation policies? Is their ambiguous insertion into mainstream society always and forever suspect? Is assimilation a one-way street, and are there no protocols to reverse the path? Sally is seriously racked by these questions:

Had I been dishonest with myself? What did it really mean to be Aboriginal? I’d never lived off the land and been a hunter and a gatherer. I’d never participated in corroborees or heard stories of the Dreamtime. I’d lived all my life in suburbia and told everyone I was Indian. I hardly knew any Aboriginal people. What did it mean for someone like me?<sup>52</sup>

*My Place* can only resolve these problems via a *deus ex machina*. The family’s journey into the Pilbara becomes a genealogical assimilation of Indigeneity, as they are to be accepted into the local Indigenous kinship system with no apparent social demands on their ‘belonging’. An Elder assigns skin groups to Sally and her family and so opens the doors to occupying ‘their natural place’ in the community:

[Sally] must be Burungu, your mother is Panaka, and Paul [Sally’s white husband], we would make him Malinga. Now, this is very important, you don’t want to go forgetting this, because we’ve been trying to work it out ever since you arrived [...] now you can come here whenever you like. We know who you belong to now [...] you just tell them your

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<sup>50</sup> Kurtzer, “*Wandering Girl*: who defines ‘authenticity?’” 183.

<sup>51</sup> Huggins, “Always was always will be,” 62, 65.

<sup>52</sup> Morgan, *My Place*, 141.

group and who you're related to. You got a right to be here same as others [...] You got your place now.<sup>53</sup>

Being 'in place' means acquiring a different, Indigenous awareness of country, and one merges seamlessly into the other as Sally proceeds to write:

We were glad, too. And overwhelmed at the thought that we nearly hadn't come. How deprived we would have been if we had been willing to let things stay as they were. We would have survived, but not as whole people. We would have never known our place [...] What had begun as a tentative search for knowledge had grown into a spiritual and emotional pilgrimage. *We had an Aboriginal consciousness now*, and we're proud of it.<sup>54</sup>

The ritual of identity assignation that she and her kin go through in Indigenous sites leads to the critical question of whether Morgan has left any more performative traces of Indigenous subject formation in the text which might add to the 'Indigeneity' of the text. As *My Place* is an account of broken silences, the negotiation of their uncovering through a strategic rewriting of genre, gender, race, and class is crucial to establishing answers.

### Articulating the Unspeakable

*My Place* is embedded in a promiscuous field of minority expressions in Australian postcoloniality which confuses and subverts WASP control of cultural expression.<sup>55</sup> In its mediation of race and gender-imposed silences, *My Place* adapts a range of European genres to an Indigenous storytelling mode, in an amalgam recognizable as life writing. The latter is an important site where interests in more

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<sup>53</sup> *My Place*, 231–233.

<sup>54</sup> *My Place*, 231–233, emphasis added.

<sup>55</sup> See Sneja Gunew, "Denaturalizing cultural nationalisms," 100. See also Chapters 1 and 2.

traditional, 'authentic' forms of communication, productively merge with experimental, 'inauthentic' approaches to Indigenous expression that develop synchronically and diachronically in contact with mainstream culture. Michèle Grossman describes life writing as a fertile ground for socio-historical critique:

life writing has proved a particularly attractive genre for Indigenous Australians wishing to re-vision and re-write historical accounts of invasion, settlement and cross-cultural relationships from individual, family and community-based Indigenous Australian memories, perspectives and experiences. In so doing, life writing has constituted a dynamic form of historical intervention that both revises colonial historical narratives and also challenges, in its articulations as 'history from below', the generic paradigms in which such histories may be inscribed and represented, and by whom.<sup>56</sup>

She also argues that this openness to cultural difference also reflects the level of genre—one feeds into the other:

the range of texts that may be defined under the banner of 'life writing' is instructively diverse, spanning and collocating genres including both conventional and experimental auto/biography, oral history, testimonial writing, ficto-memoir, biography, essays, and auto-ethnography.<sup>57</sup>

Wenche Ommundsen illustrates this by pointing out that *My Place* is an instance of life writing ('life story') that borrows elements from the detective genre (a secret to be uncovered), the quest for romance (a search for the Indigenous self), the battler genre (success in the face of multiple adversities), and the foundling story (a lost identity).<sup>58</sup> It therefore offers a blend of styles which is perceived as

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<sup>56</sup> Grossman, "Risk, Roguery and Revelation," 10.

<sup>57</sup> "Risk, Roguery and Revelation," 10.

<sup>58</sup> Ommundsen, "Engendering the Bicentennial Reader," 253. The battler genre is "a common form in white writing" (Broun, "Unmaking White Myths," 24) and deals

problematic as well as productive—what I have called promiscuous. Ommundsen holds that, though *My Place* apparently favors white over Indigenous genres,

the insistence on truth which punctuates her book leaves little room for even cautious objections that its structuring principle owes more to narrative logic or to Aboriginal and communal notions of truth than to historical accuracy as perceived by white culture.<sup>59</sup>

Kathryn Trees claims that a lack of generic definition invests *My Place* with the capacity to break silences and reveal uncomfortable truths. Morgan's novel "distorts European generic boundaries and blurs the distinction between literature and history," in that it employs the alleged accuracy of the autobiographical mode to establish a notion of authenticity and truth in the personal life described:

Autobiography is certainly not unmediated truth or fiction but a discourse generally held to have a stronger, more direct connection with events, human experience and the record of life.<sup>60</sup>

Yet, at the same time, Indigenous life writing defuses the scrutiny that autobiography might invite by recurring to other generic modes.

In life writing, then, the author may employ the written text as a "counter-memory of [...] violence and deculturation"<sup>61</sup> in an uncanny

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with individual (male) success in the face of adversities by stamina, and is, as such, associated with the bush myth.

<sup>59</sup> "Engendering the Bicentennial Reader," 254–255.

<sup>60</sup> Kathryn Trees, "Counter-Memories: History and Identity in Aboriginal literature," in *Whose place? A study of Sally Morgan's My Place*, ed. Delys Bird & Dennis Haskell (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1992): 56–57. See also Muecke, "Aboriginal Literature and the Repressive Hypothesis," 410, and Newman, "Race, Gender and Identity," 67–69.

<sup>61</sup> Trees, "Counter-Memories," 55.

movement that rewrites the mainstream “palimpsest”<sup>62</sup> of Australian History. The “crucial knowledge” of which Sally had been deprived as a child<sup>63</sup> turns, once in print, into an indictment of the policies of segregation and assimilation wielded against the Indigenous population. By the token of her Western training, Morgan resorts to scientific method, such as the use of documentary evidence and Indigenous informants in her (re)search, in order to invest her account with the academic weight of objective fact, but substantial amounts of Indigenous Western Australian history remain policed and silenced:

A lot of our history has been lost, people have been too frightened to say anything. There's a lot of history we can't even get at [...] There are all sorts of files about Aboriginals that go way back, and the government won't release them.<sup>64</sup>

This disturbing void of repressed knowledge forces her to sound out her mother and grandmother but runs up against their resistance,<sup>65</sup> so she resorts to trickster strategies to reveal their secrets:<sup>66</sup>

We're Aboriginal, aren't we, Mum? “Yes, dear”, she replied, without thinking. “Do you realise what you just said?!” I grinned triumphantly [...] “Don't you back down!” I said quickly. “*There's been too many skeletons in our family closet.*”<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Collingwood-Whittick, “Re-presenting the Australian Aborigine,” 41. A palimpsest is a “manuscript, typically of papyrus or parchment, that has been written on more than once, with the earlier writing incompletely erased and often legible” and hence, an “object, place, or area that reflects its history”—see “palimpsest,” in *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition* (Houghton Mifflin, 2004; Answers.com, 2008), <http://www.answers.com/topic/palimpsest> (accessed 19 July 2008).

<sup>63</sup> Wright, “A fundamental question of identity,” 94.

<sup>64</sup> Morgan, *My Place*, 164.

<sup>65</sup> *My Place*, 164.

<sup>66</sup> Elder, “Silence as Expression,” 22.

<sup>67</sup> Morgan, *My Place*, 135, emphasis added.

Thus, the narrative acquires a psychologizing slant by concentrating on the emotional family economy, which causes it to drift into a more pronounced employment of the female Gothic.

Maggie Kilgour points out that the Gothic as well as the Romantic novel came into existence in reaction to Enlightenment literature. The former functioned as the dark foil to the latter, with which it shared a penchant for “the bizarre, eccentric, wild, savage, lawless, and transgressive.” She observes that the Gothic has generally “been associated with a rebellion against a constraining neoclassical aesthetic ideal of order and unity, in order to recover a suppressed primitive and barbaric imaginative freedom.” Thus, psychoanalytic readings see the Gothic as “the return of the repressed.” Mystic-spiritual views understand the Gothic as “a sign of the resurrection of the sacred and transcendent in a modern enlightened secular world which denies the existence of supernatural forces.” Socio-historical readings analyze the rise of the Gothic as an expression of the rise of the middle class and the novel proper.<sup>68</sup> *My Place* effortlessly fits into this wide-ranging framework as the return of the repressed Indigenous past (as sacred), as an Indigenous middle-class product, or as a postcolonizing experiment with novelistic form.

As to the female Gothic, Gerry Turcotte interprets the reappropriation of the Gothic by contemporary female writers as their way “to comment on those ‘systems’ that institutionalize and perpetuate imperialist, sexist, or so-called ‘normative’ values,” but observes that they “celebrate female experience [...] in decidedly negative terms.”<sup>69</sup> Maggie Kilgour declares the latter ambiguity, the failure to signal a way out of oppression, to be typical of the Gothic. The genre could never resolve the tensions between a reactionary Enlightenment morality and the revolutionary aesthetic values of Romanticism, because both were bourgeois inventions. The classic female-Gothic agenda was configured in the writing of Ann Radcliffe, the most celebrated eighteenth-century Gothic writer in English. Her stories present a momentary, terrifying subversion and subsequent restoration of (domestic) order for the tale’s heroine as well as its

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<sup>68</sup> Maggie Kilgour, *The Rise of the Gothic Novel* (London: Routledge, 1995): 3–4.

<sup>69</sup> Gerry Turcotte, “Sexual Gothic: Marian Engel’s ‘Bear’ and Elizabeth Jolley’s ‘The Well,’” *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 26.2 (1995): 65–69.



female reader; both would “naturally” celebrate the return to the patriarchal norm after the horror experienced, turning reading into “a dangerously conservative substitute for political and social action.”<sup>70</sup> Kilgour, however, suggests that the genre may be successfully employed as a strategy of female subversion:

The female Gothic itself is not a ratification but an exposé of domesticity and the family, through the technique of estrangement or romantic defamiliarisation: by cloaking familiar images of domesticity in gothic forms, it enables us to see that the home *is* a prison, in which a helpless female is at the mercy of ominous patriarchal authorities.<sup>71</sup>

Thus, the Gothic's postmodern female agenda is ambiguous: while revealing patriarchal (and racial) constraints, it “rarely moves towards conclusions, or [...] signals either overtly or covertly the failure of closure.”<sup>72</sup>

This paradox also affects *My Place*. Although Sally exposes the ghost of racialized gender oppression at home, her articulation of Indigeneity is often perceived as lacking political engagement. As the text/Nan refuses to unveil the deepest secrets of the family's past—the plausibility of incest—Nan's death becomes the narrative's conclusion *in medias res*. Gothic lack of closure also operates in Sally's confrontations with hidden knowledge whose revelation requires non-linguistic evidence. Her grandmother's evasive non-communication presents an insurmountable barrier; Sally has to resort to the ‘ethnographic’ evidence of family photographs in order to articulate Indigeneity. Gladys's barely articulated hunch that Howden Drake-Brockman could have fathered her is confirmed in a mirror scene in which Gladys appears as the dark double of her white (grand)father: “Suddenly, I held up a photograph of Howden as a young man next to [Gladys's] face [...] We both fell into silence. ‘My God [...] he's the spitting image of you!’”<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Kilgour, *The Rise of the Gothic Novel*, 8.

<sup>71</sup> *The Rise of the Gothic Novel*, 9, emphasis in original.

<sup>72</sup> Turcotte, “Sexual Gothic,” 83.

<sup>73</sup> Morgan, *My Place*, 237.

Contrary to this insistence upon visual markers of kinship, Morgan and the publisher initially avoided including family pictures in *My Place*. While what to Shakespeare's Othello was "ocular proof" of an illicit relationship<sup>74</sup> could have heightened the text's documentary truth effect, they aimed to inscribe the novel in the Indigenous storytelling tradition rather than social history,<sup>75</sup> prioritizing the Indigenous word over the white gaze.<sup>76</sup> Arguably, Morgan meant to offer some protection from scrutinizing mainstream eyes, as their lives were being "paraded" in the novel according to Gladys.<sup>77</sup> As Sidonie Smith writes: "In post/colonial locations such as Australia, family photos can [...] become highly contested documents because disturbing questions arise about who's in whose family."<sup>78</sup> Nevertheless, a rare, illustrated hardbound edition with sixteen black-and-white photographs was put into print two years after *My Place's* first publication,<sup>79</sup> a fact that allows Smith to deliver a pervasive deconstructive critique within the authenticity debate, dislocating Sally's construction of her identity through the text. Smith's analysis, which negotiates *My Place's* silences through visual and verbal data, understands Morgan's identity as ambiguously in and out of place while performing white and Indigenous features and addressing issues of race, gender, and class simultaneously.<sup>80</sup>

The physical inscription of Indigeneity onto the body makes visible the unspeakable secret that the family past holds and announces the failure of a white politics of assimilation; Gladys realizes that "it was

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<sup>74</sup> William Shakespeare, *Othello*, ed. Norman Sanders (1984; Cambridge: Cambridge UP 1997): III.iii.365.

<sup>75</sup> Wright, "A fundamental question of identity," 102; Elder, "Silence as Expression," 17.

<sup>76</sup> Stephen Muecke, *Textual Spaces: Aboriginality and Cultural Studies*, 71. Muecke writes that Aboriginal history relies on the word through chains of custodianship, whereas white history on the gaze following a realist aesthetic.

<sup>77</sup> Wright, "A fundamental question of identity," 97.

<sup>78</sup> Sidonie Smith, "Re-Citing, Re-Siting, and Re-Sighting Likeness: Reading the Family Archive in Drusilla Modjeska's *Poppy*, Donna Williams' *Nobody Nowhere*, and Sally Morgan's *My Place*," *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies* 40.3 (Fall 1994): 530.

<sup>79</sup> Smith, "Re-Citing, Re-Siting, and Re-Sighting Likeness," 527. A "Family Album" of photographs was appended to the 1989 "Illustrated" hardbound edition of *My Place*.

<sup>80</sup> "Re-Citing, Re-Siting, and Re-Sighting Likeness," 533–534.

harder for [Nan] than for me because she was so broad featured she couldn't pass for anything else [...] people stared at her, I hadn't realised that before."<sup>81</sup> Darkness of the skin is the very feature that Nan's stubborn, defensive silence has tried to obliterate from the family's self-perception: "You bloody kids don't want me, you want a bloody white grandmother, I'm black. Do you hear, black, black, black!" so that "for the first time in my fifteen years, I was conscious of Nan's colouring."<sup>82</sup> But why has Sally been so gullible? Is her lack of understanding the touchstone for her mother and grandmother's strategy of racial passing? Is hers a disturbing case of denial? How can a person with a vested interest in the visual arts be unaware of her grandmother's factions and skin color,<sup>83</sup> especially when her brothers and sisters are aware of their Indigenous ancestry and its implications?<sup>84</sup> Is gullibility therefore an authorial/fictional intervention to inscribe the discovery of Indigeneity as a structural device in a *novelistic* quest motif? Alternatively, is Sally's reconstruction of herself in this (con)text mediated by other narrative conventions that question the realist ones inexorably leading to Western notions of 'authentic' truth?

Indeed, the fictional slip from Western autobiography into a framework of postcolonial female Gothic is consummated when Sally decides to hunt down the Indigenous specter at the homestead. Preoccupied by the fear of separation and the shame of incest, Nan appears as the undead Indigenous ghost at the family home where Sally's textual and geographical journey through Perth's Battye library and the Pilbara district must come full circle. The homestead becomes increasingly unhomey as Nan ferociously guards her secrets<sup>85</sup> and locks herself away:

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<sup>81</sup> Morgan, *My Place*, 278.

<sup>82</sup> *My Place*, 97.

<sup>83</sup> Morgan has long been professionally active as a painter, and provided the cover painting for the original edition of *My Place*.

<sup>84</sup> For instance, Sally's sister recriminates her: "You still don't understand, do you', Jill groaned in disbelief. 'It's a terrible thing to be Aboriginal. Nobody wants to know you'" (*My Place*, 98).

<sup>85</sup> Elder, "Silence as Expression," 17.

I continued to prompt Nan about the past, but she dug her heels in further and further. She said that I didn't love her, that none of us had ever loved or wanted her. She maintained that Mum had never looked after her properly. In fact, she became so consistently cantankerous that she gradually drove us all away. Everyone in the family got to the stage where, if we could avoid seeing Nan, we would.<sup>86</sup>

Thus, the terrible dark (or white?) secret haunting the narrative stages conflict in the female domestic setting, but Sally's attempt to break out of this Gothic trap also makes the text a postcolonizing project of reinventing storytelling where the Indigenous transmission of knowledge has been interrupted.

### Ghosts and Guardians

In mediating between Western writing and Indigenous oral narrative, *My Place* serves as a self-referential text, not only in tracing its own steps in the process of writing<sup>87</sup> but also in addressing ways of incorporating Indigenous forms of storytelling and authorship. Breaking the silence is the very key to storytelling, but silence is also, paradoxically, that feature of Indigeneity that "represents most surely the traditional Indigenous heritage that Morgan wishes to uncover and convey."<sup>88</sup> That is, the transmission of knowledge is based on custodianship and secrecy, and authorship is thus inscribed in a shared communal tradition rather than in individual creative effort. In order to gain access to stories/knowledge, the correct conditions of its transmission must obtain, invoking ritual and sacredness.

Stephen Muecke points out that Indigenous culture knows no category of fiction, so that all Indigenous oral narrative is factual as long as it does not pertain to the Dreaming.<sup>89</sup> Stories produced by

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<sup>86</sup> Morgan, *My Place*, 145.

<sup>87</sup> Elder, "Silence as Expression," 19.

<sup>88</sup> "Silence as Expression," 17.

<sup>89</sup> Muecke, *Textual Spaces*, 65–66. Further page references are in the main text.

Indigenous oral narrative “are all true to the extent that the discourse is correctly produced within the cultural apparatuses which make it possible.”

to say they are true means to say that you were there, or you knew someone who was who gave you the story; or its validity as collective production is amply demonstrable if the listener is referred to someone who is the uncle of the main character in the story, and so on. (89–90)

Muecke goes on to say that Indigenous truth is not discursively validated according to the Western protocol of historical studies, in which linear temporal development, hierarchical focus on key figures, the official character of sources, and the meticulous selection of ethnographic detail prevail. Rather,

both ‘Dreaming’ stories (which have a metaphysical validity standing outside of time measurement) and ‘true stories’ (which are validated by being linked to witnesses) can be read as ‘historical’, even in Western terms. (89–90)

Crucially, this is possible because the historical truth of Indigenous oral narrative is configured by scrupulous respect for its guardians:

the listener is [...] linked, personally and in a ‘line’ of custodianship, via previous narrators [...] back to the actual event [...] The ‘white’ history thus relies on the gaze [...] while the Aboriginal history relies on *the word*. (71)

This explains why Arthur exclaims, “Don’t go takin’ the word of white people against mine”<sup>90</sup> when he establishes Howden Drake-Brockman as his and Nan’s father. It is also “a serious transgression of Aboriginal ‘copyright’ to speak unlawfully a text which ‘belongs’ to

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<sup>90</sup> Morgan, *My Place*, 157.

someone else,"<sup>91</sup> so that Arthur warns Sally that certain information cannot be revealed unless her grandmother herself chooses to do so.<sup>92</sup>

Disturbingly, Nan's female experience is 'sacralized', as she refuses to pass on knowledge that only she is in charge of but which is too painful to share; it is enveloped in multiple layers of silence and secrecy precisely because of the immense damage inflicted on her by white culture, which has *desacralized* her very sexuality in the act of interracial rape and incest. In the (con)text of *My Place*, Indigenous female experience is tainted by a Western patriarchal/racist secret upon which the narrative slowly encroaches, and Nan's "brick wall"<sup>93</sup> metaphorically (re)presents defensive silence as the text's most outstanding Indigenous feature.<sup>94</sup> Thus, "Nan maintained a position of non-co-operation, insisting that the things she knew were secrets and not to be shared with others."<sup>95</sup> Silence, shame, and fear all form part of a Gothic return of the Indigenous sacred which inscribes 'truth' in the Indigenous transmission and custodianship of sensitive knowledge rather than in Western psychotherapy.<sup>96</sup> Logically, a minimally successful construction of Sally's Indigenous Place must involve a "deferment of (narrative) authority,"<sup>97</sup> which sees Morgan increasingly relinquish her own voice to favor others as Indigenous silences are broken along the chain of custodianship.

While Jackie Huggins claims that Sally's narrative frames and assimilates Indigenous voices,<sup>98</sup> I would argue it is the reflection of a process of growth that shows her struggling with divergent discourses. It eventually refuses to subsume Indigenous under Western experience, and consciously makes way for the voices of

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<sup>91</sup> Muecke, *Textual Spaces*, 86, quoting from Basil Sansom, *The Camp at Wallaby Cross: Aboriginal Fringe Dwellers in Darwin* (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1980): 24-25.

<sup>92</sup> Morgan, *My Place*, 158.

<sup>93</sup> Wright, "A fundamental question of identity," 95.

<sup>94</sup> Elder, "Silence as Expression, 17.

<sup>95</sup> Morgan, *My Place*, 163.

<sup>96</sup> Morgan must have explored the latter path and decided not to pursue it: it is probably not coincidental that she holds a postgraduate diploma in psychology by Curtin University.

<sup>97</sup> Muecke, "Aboriginal Literature and the Repressive Hypothesis," 415.

<sup>98</sup> Huggins, "Always was always will be," 63.

custodians of the past to emerge; Sally progressively fades out as o/Others fade in for the narrative to unfold correctly. The 'true' journey into family history starts off with Sally's account, then Arthur's, next Gladys's, and finally Nan's, as silences are slowly unraveled and take readers into o/Other understandings of the world. Although this is a contrived, arguably "brilliant" structure, Morgan claims that "not a great deal of thought went into [it] [...] It took no time at all because it was the way the book naturally unfolded."<sup>99</sup> Any personal data Sally delivers toward the second half of the book only serve to pave the way for the emergence of Indigenous voices. While her storytelling ambiguously straddles different genres, it is in line with Indigenous notions of sharing and guarding knowledge, which, together with its inflection with Indigenous colloquial English, inscribes it in the Indigenous oral tradition.

### *Arthur or Jilly-yung*

Parading as a Western autobiography, *My Place* therefore slowly evolves into a communal, polyphonic effort. Silences are maintained along matrilineal lines, since the greatest secret revolves around interracial sex and incest, an uncanny site of harmful knowledge that should never come to light. Accordingly, the identity of Sally's grandmother is conspicuously opaque and elusive: she 'performs' as Daisy in white society or the nursemaid Nan in the Drake-Brockmans' domestic economy, but hides her Indigenous name Talahue.<sup>100</sup> Talahue's immense need to conceal damaging and painful personal experience explains why her brother Arthur is the first to make Sally custodian of certain sensitive facts about the family past: "I told you my story now. You'll look after it, won't you?" (166).

Evidently, his male inscription in Australian territory is racially problematic, locking him into the disadvantaged working class, but relatively untroubled by gender oppression. Unaffected by the shame and fear of his female kin and proud of his life as an Indigenous

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<sup>99</sup> Bird & Haskell, "Interview with Sally Morgan," 8.

<sup>100</sup> See *My Place*, 148, 325. The French translation of *My Place* bears the title *Talahue*, drawing attention to the real narrative center of the text. Further page references are in the main text.

battler, he turns personal memory into larger historical awareness: "I want everyone to read [my story ...] because then maybe they'll understand how hard it's been for the blackfella to live the way he wants. I'm part of history, that's how I look on it" (212–213). Set in the period from 1893 to 1950, Arthur's testimony gives account of a black battler life amidst white abuse and engrained racism. The overall image conjured up is one of barely disguised slavery, in which the Indigenous male's expectations of an independent life are undermined by an excruciating overlap of race and class oppression in neocolonialist terms:

You see, the trouble is colonialism isn't over yet. We still have a white Australia policy against Aborigines. Aah, it's always been the same. They say there's been no difference between black and white, we all Australian, that's a lie. I tell you, the black man has nothin', the government's been robbin' him blind for years. There's so much whitefellas don't understand. They want us to be assimilated into white, but we don't want to be. They complain about our land rights, but they don't understand the way we want to live. They say we shouldn't get the land, but the white man's had land rights since this country was invaded, our land rights. Most of the land the Aborigine wants, no white man would touch. (212–213)

Arthur's analysis of the enduring nature of the colonial relationship is strategically bound up with gender in his revelation that Alfred Howden Drake-Brockman fathered him and Nan by Annie Padewani, the wife of a local Indigenous chief. This knowledge is validated through the testimonial quality of custodianship in Indigenous narrative, which fixes truth where Western mechanisms of recording truth are blatantly and intentionally absent:

I got no papers to prove what I'm sayin'. Nobody cared how many blackfellas were born in those days, nor how many died. I know because my mother, Annie, told me. She said Daisy and I belonged to one another. Don't go takin' the word of white people against mine [...] don't forget Alice was Howden's second wife and they had the Victorian way of thinking in those days. Before there were white women, our father



owned us, we went by his name, but later, after he married his first wife, Nell, he changed our names. (157)

Social stratification in the neocolonial world depends on white lies about 'black velvet'. Arthur's Indigenous name Jilly-yung is obscured by his Christian name, while his surname was changed by his father after the station's name, Corunna Downs; likewise, Talahue Drake-Brockman's descent is obscured by the change to Daisy Corunna. In line with the secrecy reigning in Nan's life, her Indigenous name is only unveiled toward the end of *My Place*, and earlier in the text Arthur blackmails Nan with its revelation to gain a narrative space in the novel (148).

### *Gladys and Bill*

Arthur's death triggers Sally and Gladys's desire to reverse the course of assimilation and embark upon a quest for wholeness and knowledge in the northern Pilbara District, a quest that is strongly opposed by Nan. The postcolonizing 'songline' finally leads back to a suffused romantic vision of the old station, Corunna Downs, in stark contrast to Nan's 'ugly' description of this locus of Indigenous dispossession. The nostalgic "mystical and magical" description, together with the brevity of their stay, signals a reinscription of their destination which shuttles uncomfortably between ready consumption and identitarian completion: "we'd suddenly come home and now we were leaving again. But we had a sense of place now"(229–230). This transcendental maneuver also manifests itself in the reestablishment of the family links, whose defiant "We had an Aboriginal consciousness now, and we're proud of it" (233) comes too quickly to allow an inscription of Indigeneity beyond genetics. Indeed, it stands in contradiction to Arthur's historical analysis of Indigeneity as lived experience, especially where Sally is concerned. Thus, Jackie Huggins writes:

Aboriginality cannot be acquired overnight. It takes years of hard work, sensitivity and effort to 'come back in' [...] The debt has to be repaid in various ways. It's a socialised learned

pattern of behaviour and [...] there are protocols and ethics to adhere to when 'becoming Aborigines' again.<sup>101</sup>

Nevertheless, this rash result of their "spiritual and emotional pilgrimage,"<sup>102</sup> the increasing likelihood of the incest hypothesis, and the suspicion that Gladys has more siblings unknown to her convince Sally's mother to tell her story: "If I stay silent like Nanna, it's like saying everything is all right. People should know what it's been like for someone like me [...] Perhaps my sister will read it."<sup>103</sup> This is in line with Arthur's agenda of denunciation, with the added twist of the Stolen Generations issue.

Gladys Corunna's story, spanning the period 1931–83, testifies to the racist politics of separation and assimilation imposed by Augustus O. Neville, Chief Protector of the Aborigines in Western Australia from 1915 to 1940.<sup>104</sup> It also exemplifies the related problematics of racial passing in Gladys's marriage to Bill Milroy. Gladys's youth is a long account of the Native Welfare's Department's control over Indigenous family units, whose notorious eugenicist policies were meant to ease the Indigenous race to what was deemed its inevitable extinction and, accordingly, to 'save' children of 'mixed blood' by absorbing them into the mainstream.<sup>105</sup> Because of this, but surely also to hide the traces of incest, Gladys is placed in Parkerville's Children's Home at the age of three, losing almost all contact with her mother. Rather than train for a better future, as she was promised by the Drake-Brockmans, there she learns how to suffer abuse and behave in racially and sexually predetermined ways:

You see, if there was an argument or if something had been damaged, and it was your word against a white kid, you were never believed. They expected us black kids to be in the wrong. We learnt it was better not to tell the truth, it only led to more trouble [...] [The new headmaster] was always

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<sup>101</sup> Huggins, "Always was always will be," 63.

<sup>102</sup> Morgan, *My Place*, 233.

<sup>103</sup> *My Place*, 236–238.

<sup>104</sup> Henry Reynolds, *Nowhere People* (2005; Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin Australia, 2008): 216.

<sup>105</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 45–46.

squeezing [the older girls'] legs and wanting to sit at their desks and help them with their work. Everyone just ignored it. There was no use complaining because no one would believe you.<sup>106</sup>

Racial conditioning in the public sphere strategically links up with private policies of racial, sexual, and class differentiation. On one of her few visits to Corunna Downs, Alice Drake-Brockman gives her daughter June a beautiful white doll and Gladys a black one, dressed as a servant, which greatly upsets her: "Alice just laughed and said to my mother, 'Fancy, her not wanting a black doll'" (262). Thus, Gladys's future is projected in ways similar to Nan's, whose economic exploitation is exacerbated by the Drake-Brockmans' holding the key to the mother and daughter's reunion.

While Gladys is depicted as yet another successful hard-working battler, her marriage to a white working-class outcast locks her in a downward spiral of domestic violence. Bill Milroy, an ex-prisoner of war of Anglo-Celtic descent, has undergone terrible, undigested experiences in German concentration camps. Long emotionally dead, he does not acquire his own voice in the narrative, but his story is strategically framed by Gladys's. It appeals to a mainstream understanding of the Indigenous plight by offering a white example of the grievous harm inflicted by racial/ethnic violence, a parallel teased out by Bill's haunting imprisonment near a Jewish extermination camp (288) and by the internment of Aborigines during World War II by A.O. Neville (211). The ghostly presence of Bill the beaten battler is also the foil to the resilience of the Indigenous protagonists of *My Place*, whose unexpected survival and progress defy the predictions of the social-Darwinist 'doomed race' theory.

Bill Milroy is described as "the absent male [...] physically [...] as well as emotionally."<sup>107</sup> He is constantly out of work, a chronic drunk, and often hospitalized, and his mental imbalance is never understood by the state as an illness caused by the war effort. His traumatic sodomization by a German officer maps ethnic violence across

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<sup>106</sup> Morgan, *My Place*, 64–65. Further page references are in the main text.

<sup>107</sup> Bird & Haskell, "Interview with Sally Morgan," 7.

gender, converging on Nan's secret,<sup>108</sup> and, much as in Hoffmann's Sand-Man story,<sup>109</sup> the very German officer who abused him appears in Perth under a different guise,<sup>110</sup> which plunges him into madness. Through Bill, Gladys's life slowly becomes a torment of class, gender, and racial violence, which undercuts her attempt at passing. As the family struggles on financially and Bill's mental condition deteriorates, his racial prejudice against Aborigines increases. Turning violent against his kin, he forces them to spend nights at their neighbor's but always tries to lure them back home in Gothic ways:

“Gla-ad, Gla-ad...” in a really quiet way, as if to indicate that he wouldn't hurt me if I came to him. I never went outside on those occasions, I knew he'd kill me. It scared me so much because the voice wasn't really his, it was like he'd suddenly turned into a stranger. (294)

The state apparatus reinforces this unhealthy situation of haunting persecution. Bill's legal position in matters of child-custody favors him over his part-Indigenous wife, which effectively traps Gladys in her home. Her husband's death in the early 1960s comes as a release, but the fear of child removal by the Native Welfare Department forces Gladys and Nan to hide their Indigenous origins altogether. Ruled by fear and shame, they reinstate the Gothic prison of domesticity for themselves, even long after the assimilation policy has been abolished (348). To Gladys, breaking the silence is a final release from this trap, a therapeutic catharsis based on finding a custodian for her traumatic lived experience:

It hasn't been an easy task, baring my soul. I'd rather have kept hidden things which have now seen the light of day. But like everything else in my life, I knew I had to do it. I find I'm embarrassed sometimes by what I have told, but I know I

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<sup>108</sup> Morgan, *My Place*, 282.

<sup>109</sup> See Chapter 1.

<sup>110</sup> *My Place*, 283. Further page references are in the main text.

cannot retract what has been written, *it's no longer mine*.  
(305, emphasis added)

*Nan, Daisy or Talahue*

Nan only shares her life's experience after a terminal illness has been detected, but even then she buries essentials: "Well, Sal, that's all I'm gonna tell ya [...] I got my secrets, I'll take them to the grave [...] They not for you or your mother to know" (349). Nan's story runs from 1901 to 1983, the year of her death, and focusses on the impact of child removal on herself and her children, and on her insertion into the Drake-Brockmans' domestic economy. Fathered by the white patriarch, Talahue was soon separated from her Indigenous mother, and incorporated as Daisy into the group of 'half-caste' house Indigenes, who enjoyed higher status than 'full-blood' camp Indigenes. As a teenager the rupture with her Indigenous kin is exacerbated when the Drake-Brockmans take her to the Ivanhoe estate east of Perth and put her to work as a servant and nanny. Her work as a child carer articulates her third and last(ing) identity—Nan—which has floated from race to class inscription according to the dictates of assimilation. The racial-economic exploitation underlying her relationship with the wealthy upper-class Drake-Brockmans is obscured in the matriarch's claim that "we're family now." However, Nan is poignantly aware that "they wasn't my family":

Oh, I knew the children loved me, but they wasn't family. They were white, they'd grow up and go to school one day. I was black, I was a servant. How can they be your family? [...] I did all the work at Ivanhoe. The cleaning, the washing, the ironing. There wasn't nothing I didn't do. From when I got up in the morning till I went to sleep at night, I worked. That's all I did really, work and sleep. You see, it's no use them sayin' I was one of the family. (334)

'White lies' such as those of Alice Drake-Brockman are strategically employed against Nan to ensure her continuation in the family's economy, which sacks and reemploys her at their convenience and separates her from her daughter Gladys in a regime of emotional blackmail bordering on slavery. Thus, her account becomes an

indictment of the policies of racial segregation and assimilation. It takes issue with the fear, shame, and division these have instilled in people of Indigenous descent, and the destructive overlaps they generated on the terrain of race, class, and gender:

Cause you're black, they treat you like dirt [...] we was owned, like a cow or a horse [...] I'm ashamed of myself, now. I feel ashamed for some of the things I done. I wanted to be white, you see [...] What was wrong with my own people? In those days, it was considered a privilege for a white man to want you, but if you had children, you weren't allowed to keep them. You was only allowed to keep the black ones. They took the white ones off you 'cause you weren't considered fit to raise a child with white blood. I tell you, it made a wedge between the people. Some of the black men felt real low, and some of the native girls with a bit of white in them wouldn't look at a black man. There I was, stuck in the middle. Too black for the whites and too white for the blacks [...] It was a big thing if you could get a white man to marry you. A lot of native people passed themselves off as white, then. You couldn't blame them, it was very hard to live as a native. (336–337)

Nan's words frame the issue of racial passing in a regime of oppression, shame at one's origins, and survival. Be this ethically and emotionally fraught, we will see an even uncannier and even more vexed manifestation of this in the next chapter, on Colin Johnson aka Mudrooroo.

### **Productive Promiscuities**

*My Place* relies on “quasi-documentary or historical truth effects”<sup>111</sup> of autobiography as well as on the testimonial custodianship inherent in Indigenous storytelling in its attempt to incorporate contact histories into Contact History. Thus, o/Other truths may arise

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<sup>111</sup> Muecke, “Aboriginal Literature and the Repressive Hypothesis,” 409.

in the discursive liminalities of the text and its generic promiscuity may counter the insidious effects of white patriarchal policing of knowledge. Freud's incest theory receives an unexpected racial twist in *My Place*; it is not the son who desires and beds his mother by subverting paternal authority, but the father his daughter so as to reinforce his control over available female stock along racial lines. This unspeakable racial and gendered secret can only be managed by inscribing the autobiography's genealogical structure in Indigenous maternity. Marcia Langton accordingly writes that *My Place* deals with "concealing not the 'Aboriginality' of the family, but the origins of the family in incest,"<sup>112</sup> and Wenche Ommundsen concludes that the lack of closure haunting the text and its author's identity has its roots in sexual taboo—incest:

The theme of incest is [...] central to the narrative momentum in [...] *My Place* [...] linked to the quest for identity. The failure of resolution, moreover, signals a turning away from definitions of identity along oedipal lines. Sally Morgan decides to abandon her quest; the shame of the fathers has no place in her newly found individual and communal self [...] *real* Australian readers of [*My Place*] are invited to search for their identities elsewhere: outside masterplots of European civilization, outside the sins of their white Australian fathers, outside, finally, the narrative structures which locate identity within the sexual vagaries of family history.<sup>113</sup>

Crucially, the painful and shameful incest question that hovers over Morgan's origins is never answered, but need not be solved so long as the Indigenous heritage is safeguarded and further emotional damage avoided. Thus, Nan ends up acknowledging that Alfred Howden Drake-Brockman, the white patriarch, is her own father, but refuses to reveal her daughter's biological origins.

Nevertheless, Nan's insistence on keeping the incest secret assumes further disturbing salience a decade after the publication of *My Place*. In 1999, Sally Morgan stated that her grandmother must

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<sup>112</sup> Langton, "Well, I heard it on the radio", 117.

<sup>113</sup> Ommundsen, "Engendering the Bicentennial Reader," 262–263.

have had at least *six* children; all may have been fathered by Alfred Howden Drake-Brockman, making interracial rape and incest a structural element in Nan's life. This imposed sexual availability would explain why she alone of all the available servants was to accompany the Drake-Brockman family away from Corunna Downs. All Nan's six children were removed according to the dictates of official absorption and assimilation policies and the Drake-Brockmans' interest in obscuring this dark, destructive episode of family history on the margins of discrete divisions of race, class, and gender; by the time of the interview, Sally's mother, still haunted by this obscure past, persisted in attempting to uncover the lost family connections.<sup>114</sup> To counter these revelations, Judith Drake-Brockman claims that *My Place*

distorts her family's supposedly harsh treatment of Aborigines. It blackens her father Howden's name, portraying him as a sexual predator who slept with Aboriginal women, fathered their babies and even worse, that he committed incest with Morgan's grandmother, Daisy.<sup>115</sup>

In 2001, when she was already in her eighties, Judith Drake-Brockman published her memoirs, entitled *Wongi Wongi* (Nyoongar for 'snakes'), with the explicit aim of refuting *My Place's* version of her family's sexual, moral, and economic household and saving the Drake-Brockmans' honor. At this stage, the Drake-Brockmans were asking for a DNA test, which would once again inscribe the question of race to the reductive field of genetics and "blood lines."<sup>116</sup> This stubborn urge to whitewash goes to show how difficult it is to implement official Reconciliation once it reaches the sensitive level of the private sphere, and how such lack of closure keeps affecting contact history.

Lack of closure has vexed Morgan's articulation of Indigenous identity, inasmuch it is "forged through the creation of the text rather

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<sup>114</sup> Laurie, "An Interview with Sally Morgan."

<sup>115</sup> Helen Dally, "Sally Morgan: claims of fabrication," in *ninemsn Pty* (1997–2006), [http://sunday.ninemsn.com.au/sunday/cover\\_stories/transcript\\_1507.asp](http://sunday.ninemsn.com.au/sunday/cover_stories/transcript_1507.asp) (accessed 13 October 2006).

<sup>116</sup> Dally, "Sally Morgan: claims of fabrication."



than the reverse."<sup>117</sup> Indigeneity as transcendental spirituality manifests itself in her Pilbara epiphany and dream visions, in the premonitions and Indigenous bird motif that punctuate the narrative and effect important changes. Thus, transcendentalism bridges the gap between genetic belonging and a lived experience inherited from her older family members. Indigeneity is therefore nostalgically embedded in the notion of death that looms so visibly in the narrative: both Arthur and Nan, the main witnesses to the Indigenous past, soon pass away after rendering testimony of their life (hi)stories.

This may give rise to an uncanny reading in which *My Place* suggests stasis rather than political engagement. Death's "apolitical otherness," as Edward Hills writes, gestures toward society's negation of "the change that should result from the details of their stories [...] bury[ing] the past with the dead [...] reinforc[ing] conformity to a generic and cultural status quo."<sup>118</sup> Death in this vision is stiflingly unproductive, the absolute end for Indigeneity. It offers mainstream society the 'doomed race's' generous and long-awaited promise of disappearing from Australian (textual) territory in its pernicious 'pure' forms, and allows lighter-skinned Aborigines of 'mixed blood' to be de-aboriginalized by assimilation to the white mainstream. This would effectively see the guardians of the past as ghosts locked into that past, and would turn Morgan's text into a project that slots comfortably into a whitewashed celebration of the Australian Bicentennial Nation; *My Place* would disturbingly read as a return to the appeased conscience of Our Mainstream Place, pleasingly accompanied by the generosity and lack of bitterness Arthur, Gladys, and Sally display. Indeed, all three seem in favor of making reconciliatory gestures toward white Australia, which may feed into white denialism, as Sally's words seem to suggest:

In talking to Alice [Drake-Brockman], it dawned on me how different Australian society must have been in those days. There would have been a strong English tradition among the upper classes. I could understand the effects these attitudes

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<sup>117</sup> Bain Attwood, quoted in Huggins, "Always was always will be," 61.

<sup>118</sup> Hills, "What Country, Friends, Is This?," 108.

could have had had on someone like Nan. She must have felt terribly out of place. At the same time, *I was aware that it would be unfair of me to judge Alice's attitudes from my standpoint in the nineteen eighties.*<sup>119</sup>

However, as a text embedded in the ambiguous and disquieting socio-politico-historical context of Australian nation-building in the 1980s, engaged readings are possible, too, born of the agency conferred by the 'hybrid' Aborigine's existence in the liminality of a "cultural hiatus."<sup>120</sup> From this borderline postcolonizing space in which *My Place* inscribes itself, ghosts may still haunt the mainstream conscience as guardians of Indigenous historical memory. As Sheila Collingwood-Whittick points out,

at the time when *My Place* was published, the issues the author was raising about inter-racial sex and the forcible assimilation of the mixed race progeny that resulted from it, had yet to be openly acknowledged in the public arena in Australia.<sup>121</sup>

Thus, it may be argued that Sally Morgan's inscription of very sensitive subject matter at a crucial moment of national self-awareness was a first though troubled attempt to dis-cover to the nation at large what it refused to accept publicly—a shameful past—and to find common ground for its treatment.

The problematic management of the Ab/Original Sin in the Australian Garden of Eden has been evident in debates trying to fix *My Place's* uncertain location:

Although some may reject Morgan's text as an expression of Aboriginality, believing the author's lack of first-hand experience of severe discrimination disqualifies her from claiming an authentic Aboriginal identity, or feel that the text

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<sup>119</sup> Morgan, *My Place*, 170 (emphasis added). See *My Place*, 210 and 213 for Arthur; and 306 for Gladys.

<sup>120</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 46. He takes his cue from A.P. Elkin, *The Australian Aborigines* (1961; Sydney : Angus & Robertson, 1979): 379–383.

<sup>121</sup> Collingwood-Whittick, "Re-presenting the Australian Aborigine," 48.

is insufficiently political, others will feel that they gain some insights into Aboriginal culture. Many white readers feel that young Sally's story is not dissimilar to their own experience of childhood, an identification which suggests that *My Place* may represent an 'acceptable' face of Aboriginality to many. It remains a complex question as to whether such readings result in social change.<sup>122</sup>

Morgan's articulation of Indigeneity in *My Place* may be questioned for its double inscription in Indigenous and non-Indigenous discourse, or

doubly consecrated since the author is seen to speak not only from the authority possessed by the white texts she has consulted in the Battye library, but also from the sworn, first-hand, oral testimony of her Aboriginal kin.<sup>123</sup>

It seems that these matters will never be satisfactorily settled if one remains within the immediate context of the production of Morgan's auto/biography; with some hindsight one should recognize that Morgan's text, despite being haunted by multiple lacks of closure, takes a meritorious though disturbing lead in addressing the painful, conflictive issue of mixed-descent Aborigines at a *postcolonizing* moment of transition in Australian multiculturalism which ambiguously embeds post-assimilation discourse in notions of *post-*as historically *after* and conceptually *beyond*.

### **An Indigenous Woman's Success Story?**

Morgan's text shuttles between a Gothic return to the mainstream norm for its Indigenous ghosts and the preservation of its guardians' historical memory and hence political action to rupture that norm. Both the danger of "death's apolitical otherness" and the possibility of a rearticulation of Indigeneity have been left in the narrative by

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<sup>122</sup> Newman, "Race, Gender and Identity," 73-74.

<sup>123</sup> Collingwood-Whittick, "Re-presenting the Australian Aborigine," 49.

Arthur and Nan as their legacy of resistance to the nation before dying of natural causes in old age,<sup>124</sup> and the choice of what to do with this heritage is for the living. Due to *My Place's* condition as a cultural artefact of the late 1980s, these two possibilities circulate through each other and prevent the text's and identity's closure. Thus, Sally's articulation of Indigeneity is positioned between the recovery of historical memory (the guardian who "would never forget" [354]) and transcendentalism (the ghost beckoning from the beyond: "I heard [the Indigenous bird call], too. In my heart, I heard it" [357]). Meanwhile, Gladys's vision of Indigeneity is affected by the pernicious *post-effects* of assimilation, and grapples uncomfortably with notions of biological determinism and acculturation:

I suppose in hundreds of years' time, there won't be any black Aboriginals left. Our colour dies out, as we mix with other races, we'll lose some of our physical characteristics that distinguish us now. I like to think that, no matter what we become, our spiritual tie with the land and other unique qualities we possess will somehow weave their way through to future generations of Australians. I mean, this is our land, surely we've got something to offer. (305)

However, Kevin Gilbert, of mixed descent, produced the following response to the nature of Indigeneity by imagining the voice of a traditional elder, which breaks away from essentialism and primes agency and inclusion.<sup>125</sup> Building from the community tradition, it articulates an inscription of Indigeneity as a *process* of self-management, solidarity, and mutual respect:

Aboriginality, eh? You say you want your Aboriginality back?  
That means having some rules, don't it? And the first two

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<sup>124</sup> Morgan, *My Place*, 145. One might ask whether Nan's terminal lung cancer has any psychosomatic causes apart from smoking too much: "You're always going on about the past these days, Gladys, I'm sick of it. It makes me sick in here', she pointed at her chest." Further page references are in the main text.

<sup>125</sup> My sincere thanks to the Indigenous historian Philip Morrissey for pointing out to me that "Grandfather Koori" is in fact an invented, composite character in *Living Black* who summarizes Gilbert's findings.

orders of those rules is *share* and *care* [...] I don't care how hard it is. You *build* Aboriginality, boy, or you got nothing. There's no other choice to it [...] Every person on earth can share in Aboriginality. It is a blessing you can give 'em to share in. The hungry, the homeless, the poor and the beaten, all those that are unhappy or in worse circumstances than yourselves are to be welcomed around your fires but they, too, must follow the rules [...] If our people cannot change how it is among themselves, than the Aboriginal people will never climb back out of hell.<sup>126</sup>

In line with Indigeneity as "social practice, with lived responsibilities and shared histories,"<sup>127</sup> Jackie Huggins wonders whether Sally Morgan has served herself rather than her newly acquired community with the popularity, status, and financial benefits gained from her book:

Has she set up any enterprises that might advance our causes, for example, a writer's trust fund, charities, encouraged and promoted other black artists etc? Or has she distanced herself and individualised her own gain? This is the criticism that many Aboriginal people have made of her new-found identity.<sup>128</sup>

Huggins' essay was first published in 1993, and on its reissue in 2003 the editor, Michèle Grossman, noted that Morgan had indeed made a commitment to such a communal cause in the fifteen years that had passed since *My Place's* first appearance. While involved in school workshops with Indigenous children at an earlier stage,<sup>129</sup> in 1997 a Indigenous lobby including Sally and her sister Jill, an educationalist, managed to land the necessary state funding to set up the Centre for Indigenous History and the Arts at the University of Western Australia, which is managed by an Indigenous staff and headed by

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<sup>126</sup> Kevin Gilbert, *Living Black: Blacks Talk to Kevin Gilbert* (Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin, 1978): 304–305.

<sup>127</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 22.

<sup>128</sup> Huggins, "Always was always will be," 64.

<sup>129</sup> Bird & Haskell, "Interview with Sally Morgan," 22.

Morgan herself. Its main focus of research being Indigenous oral history and arts, Morgan points out that the center has been instrumental in breaking down the barriers between Indigenous people and university; helping Stolen Generations people to trace their descent; and engaging in the protection of Indigenous intellectual property rights in the field of the arts and Indigenous environmental issues.<sup>130</sup> Nowadays, the center has been integrated into the School of Indigenous Studies on campus at the University of Western Australia.<sup>131</sup> Morgan has also remained active in the field of Indigenous literature as a university professor and writer, and has participated in the publication of two anthologies of Indigenous Australian writing entitled *Speaking from the Heart: Stories of Life, Family and Country* (Freemantle Arts Press 2007) and *Heartsick for Country: Stories of love, spirit and creation* (Freemantle Arts Press 2008), both co-edited by Sally Morgan, Tjalaminu Mia, and Blaze Kwaymullina.

Morgan's life is a(n urban-Indigenous) middle-class success story, but in light of the foregoing not necessarily the disquieting sell-out to the mainstream proposed by some non-Indigenous and Indigenous criticism in the wake of *My Place's* publication. Particularly Mudrooroo's criticism of her autobiography as an individualist battler story has a disquieting essentialist ring of urban Indigenous people as "culturally bereft, 'fake', or 'part-Aborigines'." By scaling Indigeneity, it disturbingly harks back to theories of the assimilation era that "expected" the Indigenes "to authenticate their Aboriginality in terms of percentages of blood or clichéd 'traditional' experiences."<sup>132</sup> This is unproductive. in that it would leave people

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<sup>130</sup> Laurie, "An Interview with Sally Morgan."

<sup>131</sup> The University of Western Australia research webpage reads: "The centre for Indigenous History and the Arts (CIHA) was an Indigenous Research centre established in 1997 that now forms part of the School of Indigenous Studies on campus at the University of Western Australia. Based on the foundation established by CIHA, as well as the expertise of Indigenous staff, the research focus of the School is to ensure that Indigenous oral traditions and cultural expressions are supported, properly recognised and valued for the rich and unique contribution they make to all fields of study" ("Research," in *School of Indigenous Studies UWA*, <http://www.sis.uwa.edu.au/research>, accessed 1 February 2016).

<sup>132</sup> Michael Dodson, "The end in the beginning: re(de)finding Aboriginality," 28.

like Morgan, and many others who have descended from the Stolen Generations, in an identitarian no man's land. As the historian Henry Reynolds wrote in his *Nowhere People* about the likely presence of an Indigenous forebear in his own immediate family:

What our [family's] story suggests is the need to accept that many Australians are of mixed ancestry and that elsewhere in the world today we would simply be known and accepted as mestizo. That would seem to be obvious enough, but in Australia the intellectual, political and moral pressure has been to preserve a clear distinction between black and white and to rigorously police the no-man's land between the two camps.<sup>133</sup>

It seems better, therefore, to opt for an inscription of Indigeneity as social practice and commitment, and to assess how over the years Morgan has performed on such an agenda. Indeed, she has managed to employ the multiple, more and less beneficial changes arising out of the elaboration and publication of *My Place* so as to articulate a race, gender, and class identity<sup>134</sup> that has brought her to strategic positions of influence and power in (Western) Australian society. This, in turn, allows her to feed the advantages that come with her status as a successful female Indigenous artist, writer, and academic back into the Indigenous community. First and foremost, such a promiscuously productive reconfiguration of identity has been made possible by a reinscription in Indigeneity as process rather than in the essentials of the incest issue, whose white lie and shame could

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<sup>133</sup> Reynolds, *Nowhere People*, 238–239. Although Reynolds does not claim an Indigenous identity—though he does have an Aboriginal forebear—one should note his long-standing professional commitment with the Aboriginal cause and his outstanding reputation as a humanist scholar. A mestizo is defined as a person of mixed descent, especially in the Hispanic South-American context.

<sup>134</sup> Already in December 1991 Morgan said that “[*My Place*] completely changed my life and the lives of everyone in my family [...] you always have difficulties that go with change, it's a two-edged sword [...] I don't know what I would be doing now if I hadn't made those connections [to Aboriginal kinship, culture and land]. I'd be pretty screwed up, I think” (Bird & Haskell, “Interview with Sally Morgan,” 20–21).

have destroyed her and her family. The latter may explain why Morgan's family has never taken up the DNA challenge cast down by the Drake-Brockmans: the Oedipal answer to the incest question simply lacks importance in current thinking about identity formation by Indigenous intellectuals. They articulate Indigeneity as a practice rooted in choice and descent, not in the biological-deterministic sense of the word but as "the historical connection that leads back to the land and which claims a particular history [...] not necessarily lead[ing] to the exclusivity or the incapacity to celebrate [other configurations of identity]" and that is therefore "reluctant to assimilate or disenfranchise other identities."<sup>135</sup>

Over the years, Morgan has effectively engaged in the process of closing the multiple painful gaps her autobiographical narrative left open in the fields of race, class, and gender, which have haunted her narrative inscription insistently and for so long. These ambiguities were born of the aftermath of assimilation policies and the advent of more equitable multiculturalism, which dislocated the text and its author as ambiguously in and out of place in postcolonizing Australia. But if identity formation is based on social practice rather than on individual essence, the testimony that Sally Morgan's writing gave in 1987 should not be read in restrictive isolation: *My Place* surely deserves merit as an important step-up to later developments in her life. This would also understand her 'promiscuous' articulation of Indigeneity, straddling the traditional and modern, as no less valid or 'authentic' than traditionalism and primitivism. As long as identities are defined as exclusionary categories, the descent of the Stolen Generations is likely to be plagued by troubling questions about their identities, interests, and motivations in contemporary Australia. Morgan, however, seems to have come a substantial way in mastering her ghosts, and, accordingly, the location of her/*My Place* as a strategic position of engagement with the Indigenous cause in Australia's multicultural land- and textscape feels more secure than three decades ago.

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<sup>135</sup> Philip Morrissey, "Aboriginality and corporatism," 59.



### 3

## White Lie and Eth(n)ic Trouble

### *A Portrait of the Artist as a Black (W)hole*

I ha[ve] discovered that identity is a fragile thing and can be taken away, just as it can be given<sup>1</sup>

#### **The Mudrooroo Affair**

The 1992 Mabo Decision played a decisive role in the History and Culture Wars, public debates in which mutually exclusive visions of Australian history, settlement, and identity competed for prevalence and were polarized around the legitimacy of the white presence on the continent and what it means to be 'authentically' Australian.<sup>2</sup> In the heat of this discursive battle, individuals inevitably fell prey to the resulting clashes of opposed political interests, and an important part of the tension around 'authenticity' and 'authentic Australianness' fleshed out in the Mudrooroo Affair, a fraught identity case involving a figurehead of Indigenous rights and culture: the well-known writer and academic heavyweight Colin Johnson. Johnson had renamed himself with the Indigenous name Mudrooroo (Nyoongar for the paperbark tree) in the 1980s as an act of political vindication, and participated in the aforementioned Oceania debate<sup>3</sup> as the only 'Indigenous' participant. Yet, not having, like Sally Morgan, an Indigenous bloodline to authenticate his belonging, he was eventually barred from Indigeneity and ostracized from the mid-1990s on. The so-called Mudrooroo Affair was compounded by a

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<sup>1</sup> Mudrooroo, "Tell them you're Indian: An Afterword," in *Race Matters: Indigenous Australians and "Our" Society*, ed. Gillian Cowlishaw & Barry Morris (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies, 1997): 263.

<sup>2</sup> Henry Reynolds, *Forgotten War* (Sydney: U of New South Wales P/Newsouth, 2013): 1-8.

<sup>3</sup> See the introductory chapter.

well-documented accusation of an intentional, self-interested misappropriation of Indigenous identity as well as by its overlap with gender and class issues, and by Mudrooroo's notoriously elusive and difficult personality, no doubt the product of a tough start in life. It causes his case to be particularly complex, fraught, and knotty in its ethical and discursive ramifications. The resulting 'black w/hole' of the author's identity and oeuvre is inextricably bound up with the perception and reception of the shifting connections between power, knowledge, and language regarding Indigeneity in the pre and post-Mabo eras.

The Mudrooroo Affair can be understood as a narrative of spectral return on the uncanny edges of Indigenous embodiment. It lays bare the postcolonizing character of Australia's nation space as a realm of identitarian flux, in which Mudrooroo's racial identity has had particular relevance for its disturbing overlaps with class and gender, in ways that beg for untangling and unpacking. Whereas the Mudrooroo Affair heavily polarized Australian identity politics, it was also so vexed in its ethical dimensions that Mudrooroo's case has been covered with the proverbial cloak of silence, disembodiment and spectralizing his presence. Mudrooroo's supporters and detractors can be found in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous circles, where he is considered either a fraud who lied about his genetic descent to further his own interests, or as a victim of past racial oppression who merely accepted the identitarian niche assigned to him by the mainstream. Both points of view can be defended and thus solicit each other in an uncanny tension where positioning ends up being a matter of political affiliation and conviction. This chapter will argue that in the Mudrooroo Affair shifts in race, gender, and class relations configure a discursive trap that complicates Mudrooroo's embodiment in contemporary categories of Australian identity, limits his agency, and poises him on the uncanny margins of identity discourse. This in turn leads to a consideration of the limits of identity politics and the hazards of embodiment and empowerment, inasmuch as discrete boundaries of identity can only exist as a product of a *politics* of the body, whether essentialist or strategic. The latter is an area that Mudrooroo has explored in dramatic fashion in his Vampire trilogy (1998–2000), which will be the focus of this chapter's textual analysis.

Should Mudrooroo be treated as either a passive victim of identification or as a self-interested agent and usurper of identity? Are matters so discrete, black and white? I would argue that both positions circulate through, and solicit each other in uncanny dis/embodiment, denying each other 'full' existence and making his identitarian incorporation incomplete and partial. Mudrooroo's 'Indigenous' identity has been shaped in and by shifting cultural-political contexts in which the ethics of identitarian choice have been a slippery and vexed issue all along, as the common practice of racial passing to whiteness indicates. The final truth (if there is one) may be quite prosaic. If in his youth he had been fully aware of his family's claim to non-Indigenous, African-American (or Jamaican) descent, as Maureen Clark's research suggests,<sup>4</sup> it is plausible that he merely adhered to a white lie projected onto his ancestry—white, because mainstream, confusing skin color with genetic descent, thus consigning him to the oppressive category of Indigenous; white, because his inverse passing would have come out of an experience of shared racism, as he has claimed. In the early 1960s his acceptance of belonging in the niche to which he was often sequestered, in the Indigenous underclass of the Australian nation-state, was an act of resistance and solidarity rather than self-interest. Yet, he ended up in a discursive no man's land in the new identitarian landscape created by the Mabo decision (1992), which produced the legal redefinition of Indigeneity that reintroduced genetics<sup>5</sup> after three decades of a more existentialist approach to Indigenous identity.

Why this apparent return to nature as informant of identity? The Mudrooroo Affair was not an isolated, idiosyncratic event. One way to frame it is as a mainstream backlash against the advancement of the Indigenous minority after the implementation of Native Title legislation (1993), which also affected other public figures with

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<sup>4</sup> See Maureen Clark, "Mudrooroo: a likely story, identity and belonging in postcolonial Australia" (doctoral dissertation, University of Wollongong, 2004), chapter 3, <http://ro.uow.edu.au/theses/189/> (accessed 1 September 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Cassandra Pybus, "From 'Black' Caesar to Mudrooroo: The African Diaspora in Australia," *Mongrel Signatures: Reflections on the Work of Mudrooroo*, ed. Annalisa Oboe (Cross/Cultures 64; Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2003): 38–39.

unclear biological ancestry.<sup>6</sup> Adam Shoemaker, a Canadian scholar working and living in Australia, an expert on Mudrooroo's oeuvre and staunch defender of the author and former academic, argues that this was most visible in "the tenure of a conservative Federal Government which has flatly refused to countenance an apology to Indigenous Australians for past wrongs committed in the name of the nation [and whose] disavowal and discreditation of Indigenous people has been strategically prominent."<sup>7</sup> This structurally ties the Mudrooroo Affair in with the Howard administration's imposition of a neoliberal creed in Indigenous affairs that aimed to free up the country's resources for mainstream exploitation, as in the recent mining boom. On this view, the Native Title Amendment Act (1998), the Northern Territory Intervention as of 2006, and the absence of a federal apology to the Stolen Generations until 2007 form part of the re-spectralization of Indigeneity into an 'authentic', essentialist past which locks it back into eugenicist theories of racial extinction and rejects the First Nations' potential for independent development as well as adaptation to altering conditions of life. Thus, Jacques Derrida's deconstructionist critique of the neoliberalist and late-capitalist denial of discourses on modernity beyond the liberal humanist self<sup>8</sup> may be confirmed in the particulars of Mudrooroo's collapse of identity. From this vantage point, Indigenous

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<sup>6</sup> See Adam Shoemaker, "Waiting to be Surprised," *JASAL* 11.2 (2011): 13, <http://www.nla.gov.au/openpublish/index.php/jasal/article/view/2311/2768> (accessed 5 October 2013). Adam Shoemaker mentions Archie Weller and Roberta Sykes in this respect. The poet and prose author Roberta Sykes was born in 1943 in Townsville, Northern Queensland and died in Sydney in 2010. Although she is now known to have been the daughter of a white Australian mother and an Afro-American father, she always identified as, and until recently had been accepted as an Indigenous Australian. She was a life-long campaigner for Indigenous land rights—as Mudrooroo was—as well as human rights and women's rights. Archie Weller was born in Cranbrook, Western Australia, in 1957, and has published poetry, short stories, novels and plays under a received Aboriginal identity, though his genealogical antecedents are unclear.

<sup>7</sup> Adam Shoemaker, "Mudrooroo and the Curse of Authenticity," in *Mongrel Signatures: Reflections on the Work of Mudrooroo*, ed. Annalisa Oboe (Cross/Cultures 64; Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2003): 14–15.

<sup>8</sup> See Chapter 2. See also Cornelis Martin Renes, "Spectres of Mudrooroo," *European Journal of English Studies* 15.1 (2011): 45–56.

spokespeople line up with conservative mainstreamers in a return to the eugenicist era by the imposition of a biological validation of Indigeneity, and this paradox has become the core of Mudrooroo's defense against his detractors.<sup>9</sup>

Yet, one could also understand the Mudrooroo Affair as resulting from the devolution of the authority to configure Indigeneity to Australia's First Nations, who have chosen to reject Mudrooroo's belonging on genetic grounds. This act of First Nations empowerment follows the United Nations recommendation that Indigenous sovereignty should entail the full control to determine the criteria of Indigeneity.<sup>10</sup> Taking my cue from the indigenous/Indigenous distinction, I will address Mudrooroo as a member of a separate discursive category of non-Indigenous, black Australians as opposed to capitalized Indigenous/Black Australians, despite the problems such a discrete distinction may generate. Holding on to Indigeneity by the thinnest of threads in the public arena—the proverbial benefit of the doubt—Mudrooroo has been investigating this new discursive 'black' space from the virtual location of his later fiction.

His Vampire trilogy attempts to deconstruct a post-Mabo ontology of the Indigenous body that reaches back to genetic essence for effective incorporation, and uses the metaphor of the vampire to allow his undead spectrality to haunt Australia's nation space. While his physical corpo-reality is suspended on Australian soil—he left Australia soon after his identity was challenged—the author seeks to reinhabit the country discursively through his fiction. Whereas prior to the Mudrooroo Affair his novels were praised for their experimentation with enabling discourses of Indigeneity, after 1996 his corpus starts speaking back with barely-contained anger to the

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<sup>9</sup> Mudrooroo Nyoongah, "Portrait of the Artist as a Sick Old Villain 'Me Yes I Am He the Villain': Reflections of a Bloke From Outside," *JASAL* 11.2 (2012), <http://www.nla.gov.au/openpublish/index.php/jasal/issue/view/202> (accessed 8 October 2013).

<sup>10</sup> See Michael Dodson, "The end in the beginning: re(de)finding Aboriginality," 25–42. This idea will be developed in a later section of this chapter. As the HREOC's Commissioner Michael Dodson was largely responsible for the *Bringing Them Home Report* on the Stolen Generations (1997). The Nyoongar are a First Nation of the Perth area to whom Mudrooroo has unsuccessfully claimed kinship.

identity politics that enabled his former friends and peers to embody themselves in the discursive landscape of Australianness but served to disembody him.<sup>11</sup> By writing into the fluidity of the subject through the Gothic figure of the vampire, he creates, by conflation, an ostensibly 'politically incorrect', alternative space from which to deconstruct the race, gender, and class-determined ghosts that haunt postcolonial identity formation. As the Mudrooroo corpus is discursively embedded in a politics of self-emancipation which announces itself but cannot come into being, it can be understood to flesh out the revenant spectrality that underpins Jacques Derrida's affiliation of deconstruction to Marxism. Caught between nihilist unbelonging and the postmodern liberating potential this offers, the author's fiction speaks back to the limitations of a bio-essentialist politics of the body and questions identity as material presence.

### Shifting Indigeneities

The Indigenous initiative to questioning Mudrooroo's identity crystallized in the years immediately following the Mabo Decision and responded to the political will to limit "resources earmarked for our community" to 'authentic' members of the First Nations.<sup>12</sup> Perth's Dumbartung Aboriginal Corporation was instrumental in the Mudrooroo Affair.<sup>13</sup> This Bibbulmun grassroots lobby for Nyoongar rights is located on the grounds of Clontarf Aboriginal College, where, in an ironic twist of fate, Mudrooroo had been interned from 1947 to

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<sup>11</sup> See Clark, "Mudrooroo: a likely story," She builds her thesis, later published as a book by Peter Lang in 2007, on the uncanny parallels between the author's life story and the content of his fiction.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Penny van Toorn, "Indigenous texts and narratives," 42.

<sup>13</sup> Dumbartung had already successfully campaigned against the US author Marlo Morgan for the misappropriation of Aboriginality spirituality in her international New-Age bestseller *Mutant Message Down Under* (1992), written after a stay in Indigenous Australia which she describes as epiphanic and illuminating. As is typical for the puzzling coincidences and gaps that affect Mudrooroo's biography and fiction, the author performs an uncanny *déjà vu* of Dumbartung's criticism in censuring another Morgan—Sally—and her novel as "a new age phenomenon" See John Eustace, "An Unsettling Affair: Territorial Anxieties and the Mutant Message," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 40.2 (2006): 68.

1955 as a disadvantaged youngster, in what was then known as Clontarf's Boys' Town mission school.<sup>14</sup> The Dumbartung protocol for Indigenous authentication holds that "someone [is] of Aboriginal descent who identifies as such and is recognized by their Aboriginal community to be so," but the institution's spokesman Robert Eggington immediately adds that "Aboriginal blood is [an] essential" prerequisite in any conception of Indigeneity.<sup>15</sup> Dumbartung's sine

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<sup>14</sup> Just off the Curtin University campus, Clontarf's Boys' Town was a mission initiative which throughout its history has housed and educated day boys and boarders, orphans, vagrants, children from disadvantaged families, child migrants and Aboriginal children. Since 1986 it has been a coeducational Aboriginal College for Indigenous Australian youth aged between 15 and 18 years. Dumbartung's headquarters are currently located on the premises, as I found out on a visit in November 2013. See "Clontarf (1901–1983)" at *Find and Connect. History and information about Australian Orphanages, children's homes & other institutions* (2015) <http://www.findandconnect.gov.au/guide/wa/WE00057> (accessed 10 July 2015).

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Carolyn D'Cruz, "'What Matter Who's Speaking?' Authenticity and Identity in Discourses of Aboriginality in Australia," *Jouvert* 5.3 (2001), <http://social.chass.ncsu.edu/jouvert/> (accessed 15 June 2006): paragraph 20. To add to the complexity of this, Mudrooroo claims that he was instrumental in setting up *Dumbartung* and that Robert Eggington was brought up white—see Mudrooroo, "Portrait of the Artist as a Sick Old Villain," 18/23. In the same period when it questioned Mudrooroo's Aboriginality, Dumbartung also staked claims against the Indigenous self-identification of Roberta Sykes, Sally Morgan, and the Western Australian author Archie Weller, as Maureen Clark notes—see Maureen Clark, "Unmasking Mudrooroo," *Kunapipi* 23.2 (2001): 49. Dumbartung has maintained a grassroots approach of vindication towards Aboriginal identity, questioning the Indigenous belonging of high-profile public Nyoongar personalities of an urban middle-class background such as Kim Scott but has also suffered the dire consequences of 'not playing ball' with the mainstream, its existence as a lobby constantly threatened by lack of funding. As with Mudrooroo, there is a sad irony here in the spatial politics of race. Kim Scott holds the prestigious position of Professor in Creative Writing at Curtin University, which is just across the road from Dumbartung's premises, adjacent to the Clontarff buildings. Kim Scott was involved in financial negotiations regarding the selling of tribal land to the government for mining purposes—the so-called 'billion dollar deal'. As Scott and Eggington mentioned to me in respective private conversations on 26 November 2014, Scott sees these negotiations and subsequent mineral exploitation as an opportunity for the Nyoongar Nation towards material and spiritual well-being, whereas Eggington does not give support to them, maintaining that the land in question should remain Nyoongar country. For the

qua non echoes the legally endorsed Commonwealth definition of Indigeneity, which straddles the gap between nature and nurture. As briefly indicated in the previous chapter, this definition is preferred by most Aborigines to the purely biological definitions from the assimilationist period, being considered “more social than racial.”<sup>16</sup> The current Federal and Constitutional definition for Australian Indigeneity states:

an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander is a person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent, who identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and is accepted as such by the community in which he or she lives.<sup>17</sup>

The importance of this three-way definition of Indigeneity based on descent, self-identification, and community recognition lies in its having become the common law benchmark for determining a person’s Indigenous belonging and thus directly feeds into the authenticity debate.<sup>18</sup> Its crux is the interpretation of descent, which the *Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia* (2003 ed.) defines as an anthropological “method of classifying individuals in terms of their various kinship connections.”<sup>19</sup> The *Britannica Concise Encyclopedia* (2006 ed.) describes descent similarly, as a “system of acknowledged *social* parentage whereby a person may claim kinship ties with another,” noting that “descent systems vary widely.” The latter source concurs with the former in defining kinship as the “socially recognized relationship”

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division of opinion among Aborigines, see, for example, “\$1.3 Billion dollar [sic] land deal in WA, signed off!” in *CAAMA: Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association* (10 July 2015), <http://caama.com.au/1-3-billion-dollar-land-deal-in-wa-signed-off> (accessed 15 October 2015).

<sup>16</sup> Marcia Langton, “Well, I heard it on the radio and I saw it on the television...”, 29.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Dodson, “The end in the beginning,” 6.

<sup>18</sup> John Gardiner-Garden, “The Definition of Aboriginality,” *Department of the Parliamentary Library Research Note* 18 (2000-2001), <http://www.aph.gov.au/LIBRARY/pubs/rn/2000-01/01RN18.htm> (accessed 24 January 2009).

<sup>19</sup> “descent,” in *The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, Sixth Edition* (2003; Answers.com 2009), <http://www.answers.com/topic/descent> (accessed 25 January 2009).



between people who are or are held to be biologically related or who are given the status of relatives by marriage, adoption, or other ritual. Kinship is the broad term for all the relationships that people are born into or create later in life that are considered binding in the eyes of society.<sup>20</sup>

These broad definitions inscribe descent and kinship flexibly as a bio-cultural continuum, with different societies performing a range of inscriptions on this scale.

One can understand the Australian Federal and Constitutional definition of Indigeneity as serving to bridge the gap between the wording of previous racially deterministic legislation and the emancipatory international benchmark definition of Indigeneity, developed by the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations in 1986, by inverting the discriminatory logic of eugenics to create the necessary foothold for positive discrimination. Thus, the UN benchmark definition is the point of departure for the Indigenous scholar and activist Michael Dodson in his groundbreaking reading of Aboriginal self-definition and self-determination in his 1994 Wentworth Lecture.<sup>21</sup> Dodson argues that Indigeneity should be considered within the larger, global parameters established by the UN, which run as follows:

Indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those which, having historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider

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<sup>20</sup> "descent," in *Britannica Concise Encyclopedia 2006* (Answers.com 2009), <http://www.answers.com/topic/descent> (accessed 25 January 2009).

<sup>21</sup> The official AIATSIS webpage reads, "Organised by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, the Wentworth Lectures are held biennially in honour of the Honourable W.C. Wentworth AO [...] The Wentworth Lectures were established in 1978 to pay tribute to Mr Wentworth's contribution to Indigenous studies in Australia and as a means to encourage all Australians to gain a better understanding of issues that go to the heart of our development as a nation"—see "The Wentworth Lectures," at *Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies* (2001), <http://www1.aiatsis.gov.au/exhibitions/wentworth/wentworthcontents.htm> (accessed 25 June 2009).

themselves distinct from other societies now prevailing on those territories, or parts of them. They form at present non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as their basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal systems.<sup>22</sup>

Notably, this wording does not specify the concepts of “historical continuity” and “ethnic identity” in cultural and/or genetic terms, but Dodson highlights the fact that the UN study does reject deterministic definitions of indigeneity based either on biological ancestry or on romanticized, immobile cultural heritage, refusing to sit “exclusively on either descent or cultural characteristics” (4–5, emphasis added).

The UN study takes an anti-Orientalist stance in recommending the following:

Indigenous populations must be recognized according to *their own perception and conception of themselves* in relation to other groups. There must be *no attempt* to define them according to the perception of others through the values of foreign societies or of the dominant sectors of such societies. (5, emphasis added)

This was the case in Australia under the eugenicist legislation between 1900 and 1970 that affected dark-skinned Australians across the board, which leads Dodson to the assertion that the “[Indigenous Australian] community has the *sovereign* right to decide who belongs to it, without external interference” (5, emphasis added). Thus, he concludes that Indigenous subjectivity and agency in the establishment of identity is the only way out of cultural and biological determinism:

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<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Dodson, “The end in the beginning,” 5. Further page references are in the main text.

The right to self-representation includes our right to draw on all aspects of our sense of our Aboriginality, *be that our blood, our descent, our history, our ways of living and relating, or any element of our cultures*. Certainly, the practice of fixing us to our blood or our romanticised traditions has been a cornerstone of racist practices. But depriving us of our experienced connection to the past is another racist practice. *The relationship we draw with our past is not to be confused with the relationships with the past that have been imposed on us. One is an act of resistance, the other is a tool in the politics of domination and oppression.* (5, original emphasis)

While Dodson advocates an open, dynamic definition of Indigeneity based on practice and performance, like Eggington he retains the strategic incorporation of “Aboriginal blood” as a defining factor, brandishing it as politically empowering (5, 10). The retention of nature and nurture as constitutive of Indigeneity may also be understood as responding to contemporary Australian jurisprudence, which has slowly evolved from establishing Indigeneity as ‘degrees of blood’ (until the 1950s), through ‘race’ (until the 1970s), to ‘descent’ (as of the 1980s). As John Gardiner-Garden notes in an oft-quoted Parliamentary study, race has been rejected as a scientific category, because

for the modern anthropologist a ‘human tree’ can do no more than show the frequency (not exclusiveness) of genetic traits in sample populations and more meaningful divisions of humankind are suggested by region, culture, religion and kinship.

While this affirms the *social* construction of identity, the current Federal definition continues to endorse the concept of ‘person of the *Aboriginal race*’, which was reconfirmed in Justice Brennan’s Mabo (No. 2) judgment:

Membership of the indigenous people depends on *biological descent* from the indigenous people and on mutual recognition of a particular person’s membership by that

person and by the elders or other persons enjoying traditional authority among those people.<sup>23</sup>

This continuity is reflected in the post-Mabo insistence of a vast array of Indigenous Australians upon Aboriginal bloodlines for community acceptance, as it is in line with “the *practical* importance of descent [, which] comes from its use as a means for individuals to assert rights, duties, privileges, or status.”<sup>24</sup> This evocation of essentialism may paradoxically be interpreted as a *strategic* use of nature in the service of an emancipatory politics of the body, as it recovers what Dodson calls “our experienced connection to the past.”<sup>25</sup> This duality is inevitably bound up with the recognition of the impact of eugenicist policies in the past and the contemporary impetus to compensate for, and move beyond, the poisonous outcomes that were legally scripted and fastened onto the Indigenous body. This explains why Mudrooroo’s identity falls outside its current discursive limits—his existentialist notion of a pan-Indigenous experience and identity has (literally) lost ground.

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<sup>23</sup> Gardiner-Garden, “The Definition of Aboriginality” (emphasis added).

<sup>24</sup> “descent,” *Britannica Concise Encyclopedia* 2006, emphasis added. This ambivalence or duality of definition makes sense, as the wish to do away with disadvantage and discrimination cannot substantiate without identifying their sources and mobilising these in turn to create advantage. In other words, if eugenics caused the harm, eugenics must inevitably be used to identify those who suffered from it so as to create the foothold for positive discrimination and to right the wrongs of the past, but this, by its very nature, is also a dangerous game to play.

<sup>25</sup> Kenneth Gelder and Jane Jacobs cite the legal case of a white environmental scientist who claimed Native Title to an uninhabited island off the Australian coast, which he was, allegedly, first to inhabit with his family. In October 1996, the national newspaper *Age* aptly punned this uncanny claim with the headline “Scientist appeals for fair Deal”—see Gelder & Jacobs, *Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity in a Postcolonial Nation* (Melbourne: Melbourne UP, 1998): xv. See also the Aboriginal author Kim Scott, as quoted in Joseph Buck, “Trees that Belong Here: An Interview with Award-Winning Australian Author, Kim Scott,” *Boomtown Magazine* 1.3 (2001), [www.boomtownmag.com/articles/200101/benang.htm](http://www.boomtownmag.com/articles/200101/benang.htm) (16 February 2005). Thus, the need to delimitate the concept of Aboriginal descent in genetic terms responds to a need to prevent fraudulent, self-interested uses of Indigenous identity.

Yet, Mudrooroo's exclusion from Indigeneity is not an unproblematic maneuver, as Carolyn D'Cruz observes: "In effect *if* an argument is dependent on the authenticity of an identity and that identity turns out to be 'inauthentic,' then *what critical leverage remains* to further political transformations?"<sup>26</sup> Indeed, the suspension of Colin Johnson's identity as Mudrooroo Nyoongah creates a discursive void that interrogates body politics as ontology of presence. In the face of such complexities, Indigenous spokespeople have also defended Mudrooroo. The Bundjalung author of *Don't Take your Love to Town* (1988), Ruby Langford Ginibi, whose Indigenous identity was also challenged, moves from the unifying element in their skin color to Mudrooroo's firm commitment to the Indigenous cause in order to uphold his right to Indigeneity:

Mudrooroo has a right to be considered an Aboriginal writer, and that right comes from the Black side of his family and his research. He couldn't write that kind of stuff if he didn't have an Aboriginal spirit. It's there. And he's lived the life of a Blackfellow in Australia from the day he was born, he's been in jail, too. He's *shared* a life, an experience, and a spirituality, the whole lot.<sup>27</sup>

The Koori author and actor Gary Foley avoids the slippage between nature and nurture that Ginibi's words invoke, and centers on a

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<sup>26</sup> D'Cruz, "What Matter Who's Speaking?" paragraph 21. See the Introduction for the Oceania debate.

<sup>27</sup> Ruby Langford Ginibi, "Sharing Stories with Mudrooroo," in *Mongrel Signatures: Reflections on the Work of Mudrooroo*, ed. Annalisa Oboe (Cross/Cultures 64; Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2003): 226 (emphasis added). One of Ginibi's adopted daughters, the late artist and academic Pamela Dahl-Helm Johnston, had similar issues regarding her Indigeneity. Though self-identifying as of Gomilaroi descent and categorised as half-caste on her 1947 birth certificate, her belonging was often questioned. She always refused to brandish her birth documentation to validate her Aboriginality. See Janie Conway-Herron, "Mapping Our Heartlands: In Memory of Doctor Pam Dahl-Helm Johnston," *Coolabah* 14 (2014): 9, <http://www.ub.edu/dpfilsa/Coolabah14/Coolabahindexvol14.html> (accessed 17 July 2015) and C. Moore Hardy, "Dr Pam Dahl-Helm Johnston was a maverick," *Coolabah* 14 (2014): 48, <http://www.ub.edu/dpfilsa/Coolabah14/Coolabahindexvol14.html> (accessed 17 July 2015).

socially inscribed, existentialist form of Indigeneity based on “mutual aid and support and close ties grounded in familiarity.” Thus, he writes: “To me Mudrooroo has lived the life of an Aboriginal person, displayed Aboriginal values, and will always be regarded by me as an Aboriginal person.”<sup>28</sup> His existentialist take is in line with Indigeneity as described in the concluding chapter of Kevin Gilbert’s *Living Black*, significantly published a decade and a half before Mabo, which stresses it as an inclusionary lifestyle rather than as an exclusionary biological given.<sup>29</sup>

Post-Mabo support from within has, however, not been sufficient to ward off Mudrooroo’s ostracization. Contemplating the damage the Mudrooroo Affair has caused her First-Nation community’s credibility and interests, the Nyoongar academic Rosemary van den Berg presents Mudrooroo’s case as the grossest of infringements of Indigenous intellectual and cultural property rights. In a harsh, unforgiving, but understandable verdict, she argues:

in Australia in recent years, there have been several thefts of Aboriginal cultural identity which mocks Aborigines in their struggles for acceptance and equality, not only in the art world, but in every sphere dealing with Aboriginal issues. The first by one, Colin Johnson, now known as Mudrooroo. Mudrooroo has changed his name so many times it is hard to keep track of who he really is. One thing is for certain though, he is not an Aboriginal person. His non-Aboriginal identity has been proven by his own family and the Nyoongar people whom Mr. Mudrooroo claims knew him as a child in a small country town in Western Australia. Mr. Mudrooroo, alias Mudrooroo Narogin, alias Mudrooroo Nyoongah, alias

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<sup>28</sup> Gary Foley, “Muddy Waters: Archie, Mudrooroo & Aboriginality,” at *The Koori History Website: Voices from Black Australia* (2003), [http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/essays/essay\\_10.html](http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/essays/essay_10.html) (accessed 31 May 2005).

<sup>29</sup> “Every person on earth can share in Aboriginality. It is a blessing you can give ‘em to share in. The hungry, the homeless, the poor and the beaten, all those that are unhappy or in worse circumstances than yourselves are to be welcomed around your fires but they, too, must follow the rules” (Kevin Gilbert, *Living Black*, 304–305). The long monologue this is taken from is placed strategically at the end of the volume, and summarizes Gilbert’s findings.

Mudrooroo, has been exposed as an imposter of the worst kind because he knew he was not an Aboriginal person, yet he used an Aboriginal identity for his own ends - aka an "Aboriginal" writer. He is now famous as an "Aboriginal writer" and his exposure as being non-Aboriginal does not seem to deter him in the least from accepting money and accolades from the white Australian public and other ignorant Aborigines. The literati, academia and the publishers, besides those ignorant Aborigines, seem to uphold his right to maintain his false identity. I ask you, where does that leave the indigenous people, the Nyoongar people, whose cultural identity he has stolen and made use of for his own ends? Are we to accept this state of affairs? Are we to let students from all over the country believe that he is a Nyoongar, an Aboriginal man. Are we to let this imposter make fools of us? What can we, as Nyoongars and as Aborigines do, especially when this man's white wife is legitimately called Mrs Nyoongah. It is a farce and an insult to my people, the Nyoongars of the south-west of Western Australia.<sup>30</sup>

Due to his loss of credibility, as of 1996 Mudrooroo's presence in Australia was marked by an increasing, partially enforced and partially self-inflicted seclusion and marginalization, in a vexed, never-expected return journey from the geographical, political, and cultural center to the fringe. Under severe public pressure, he gave up his academic job as Head of the Department of Aboriginal Studies at Murdoch University in Perth in 1997, moved to the relative isolation of the country, and later from Western Australia to Macleay Island just off the coast of Brisbane, Queensland.<sup>31</sup> Finally, one year

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<sup>30</sup> Rosemary Van den Berg, "Intellectual property rights for Aboriginal people in Australia," *Mots Pluriels* 8 (October 1998), <http://www.arts.uwa.edu.au/MotsPluriels/MP898rvdb.html> (accessed 20 June 2009). The "white wife" van den Berg refers to is the journalist Janine Little, third of Mudrooroo's five successive spouses.

<sup>31</sup> Shoemaker, "Mudrooroo and the Curse of Authenticity," 4-5.

after his last published novel to date, *The Promised Land* (2000),<sup>32</sup> he returned to Asia, where he had lived several years in the late 1960s and early 1970s. He passed through India and settled for years in Kathmandu, Nepal, allegedly to continue his life-long studies of Buddhism, whose transcendental approach to material attachment must have been attractive.<sup>33</sup> He has also been spotted in Queensland and the Northern Rivers region of New South Wales over the past few years, and now appears to be living in the Brisbane area.<sup>34</sup>

### Mudrooroo's 'Muddy' Waters

So, what 'facts' are there behind the author's fraught identity? Mudrooroo was born as Colin Johnson in the country town of Narrogin in the Western Australian wheat belt in 1938, into a poor single-parent family with much-older siblings with whom he had little contact. His darkish complexion and the dysfunctional family dynamic (his father died months before Colin's birth), poverty, separation from his siblings, social isolation, institutionalization, and imprisonment would have identified him as an Indigenous youth and would have made it likely for him to believe in and claim Indigenous descent.<sup>35</sup> The fact that his sister Betty Polglaze needed to undertake serious genealogical research to clear up the family's ancestry in the 1990s also points this way—their genealogy was a matter that required clarification and confirmation, especially as it was

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<sup>32</sup> As he has written in a confessional piece, his last manuscript, *The Survivalists*, has found no publisher yet—see Mudrooroo, "Portrait of the Artist as a Sick Old Villain."

<sup>33</sup> Maureen Clark, "Mudrooroo biography," in *The Literary Encyclopedia* (litencyc.com 2004), <http://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=3241> (accessed 9 July 2005). His alleged, recent move to Northern Queensland is far from his place of birth and apparently envisaged in retirement.

<sup>34</sup> From personal communication with the author through Facebook, 16 March 2013.

<sup>35</sup> Terry Goldie, "Who is Mudrooroo?" in *Compr(om)ising Postcolonialism(s): Challenging Narratives and Practices*, ed. Greg Ratcliffe & Gerry Turcotte (Sydney: Dangaroo, 2001): 106–107. See also Pybus, "From 'Black' Caesar to Mudrooroo," 36–37.



embedded in an environment which rejected Indigeneity and saw many Indigenous people passing to avoid oppression. The racist rural Western Australian environment of the mid-twentieth century discriminated on the basis of skin color and equated blackness with Indigeneity without further reflection, and it led to racial stigma and confusion. It also enabled Dame Mary Durack's well-known foreword to Mudrooroo's first novel, *Wildcat Falling* (1965), which textualized him as an Aborigine, much as Sally Morgan textualized herself as a Nyoongar in and through *My Place*.<sup>36</sup>

In 1992 Mudrooroo was forced to publicly profess doubts about his Indigenous lineage after conversations with his much-older sister Betty.<sup>37</sup> This was by no means politically uninformed, neutral terrain on either side. Puzzled by her much younger, long-lost brother's Nyoongar kinship claims but also worried about racial stigma,<sup>38</sup> Polglaze had been engaged in amateur genealogical research that sought to link the family's dark skin to a paternal connection of African-American, North Carolina descent. Documentary evidence remained scarce, often inconclusive, and contradictory,<sup>39</sup> which allowed Mudrooroo to question and contest his sister's findings until Cassandra Pybus's more recent research made the African-American lineage plausible.<sup>40</sup> Not being able to prove a patrilineal connection to Indigeneity, Mudrooroo suggested a matrilineal link to the Kickett family of the Bibbulmun, a local clan of the Nyoongar Nation, to maintain his claim, yet this bloodline into Indigeneity did not

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<sup>36</sup> "From 'Black' Caesar to Mudrooroo," 37; Mudrooroo, *The Indigenous Literature of Australia: Milli Milli Wangka* (Melbourne: Hyland House, 1997): 263.

<sup>37</sup> Clark, "Mudrooroo biography."

<sup>38</sup> Lucy Frost, "Fear of Passing," *Australian Humanities Review* 5 (March–May 1997): 3 of 4, <http://www.lib.latrobe.edu.au/AHR/archive/Issue-March-1997/frost.html> (accessed 9 June 2005).

<sup>39</sup> "From 'Black' Caesar to Mudrooroo," 35–38; and Shoemaker, "Mudrooroo and the Curse of Authenticity," 1–23.

<sup>40</sup> Shoemaker, "Mudrooroo and the Curse of Authenticity," 1–23. Documentary evidence of his paternal history and ancestry remain scarce and combines with a technical inconsistency on his birth certificate, as it was signed by his sister Joyreen, not his mother, Elizabeth Barron, of Irish descent.

substantiate, either.<sup>41</sup> Betty Polglaze was eventually “delighted”<sup>42</sup> to confirm the family’s ancestry as non-Aboriginal after the Western Australian Genealogical Society had lent support to her version: in 1996, a family tree going back to Irish settlers as early as 1829 and African-American ancestry as early as 1860 was officially acknowledged and recorded as correct.<sup>43</sup> In that same year, her findings attracted nation-wide attention in a controversial newspaper report in the conservative *Australian Magazine* entitled ‘Identity Crisis’<sup>44</sup> by the journalist Victoria Laurie, who had been advised by a Nyoongar informant<sup>45</sup> about the issue. The Mudrooroo Affair had become a fact.

Due to Mudrooroo’s successful career as an Indigenous writer and academic, the question of his assignation and assumption of an Indigenous identity, so logical and inevitable in his younger years,<sup>46</sup> became troubled in hindsight. Paradoxically, the accusation of a self-interested misappropriation of Indigenous identity acquired force as the rights and living conditions for Aborigines improved as of the late 1960s, ironically the result of the very struggle Mudrooroo had been committed to. In Mudrooroo’s defense, one may argue that he merely assumed what he had suffered in the flesh in his early years, and so slotted in where he was told to, and could belong—what in many ways has remained the absolute bottom rung of Australian society.<sup>47</sup> As his older brother declares, “If you were a coloured kid or an Aboriginal kid, you all sat in the same bench. These experiences make you a Nyoongah.”<sup>48</sup> Against this, it could be argued that his family had apparently never considered (or wanted to consider) itself of Indigenous descent, his racial affiliation had been unclear to the

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<sup>41</sup> See Clark, “Unmasking Mudrooroo,” 48–62; Pybus, “From ‘Black’ Caesar to Mudrooroo,” 35–38; Shoemaker, “Mudrooroo and the Curse of Authenticity,” 1–23.

<sup>42</sup> Frost, “Fear of Passing.”

<sup>43</sup> Clark, “Unmasking Mudrooroo,” 61.

<sup>44</sup> Victoria Laurie, “Identity Crisis,” *Australian Magazine* (20–21 July 1996): 28–32.

<sup>45</sup> I have not been able to trace this to a name and person but Dumbartung’s involvement seems plausible.

<sup>46</sup> Pybus, “From ‘Black’ Caesar to Mudrooroo,” 37.

<sup>47</sup> Pybus, “From ‘Black’ Caesar to Mudrooroo,” 37.

<sup>48</sup> Van Toorn, “Indigenous texts and narratives,” 42.

authorities, and that he had passed the inverse way only when there was the slightest inkling of a better future for Aborigines.<sup>49</sup> The core problem of Mudrooroo's embracing an Indigenous identity in his youth is that, from our present vantage point of Indigenous empowerment, it can be read in uncanny, ambiguous ways: simultaneously as a mainstream imposition and as an intentional, self-interested misappropriation—in what Clark aptly calls “an unholy sharing of circumstances that still endures and much like the vampire, may never die.”<sup>50</sup>

Yet, even if we assume as truthful the eventuality that because Mudrooroo was interpellated as Indigenous he embraced Indigeneity even when knowing he was not so biologically, at worst this would suggest ‘a white lie’ to cope with the effects of skin-deep racial identification and its resultant oppression in the Western-Australian ethnic context of the mid-twentieth century, as well as Mudrooroo's attempt at solidarity with the local Nyoongar, rather than the perverse crime of collaboration with the white enemy so as to make a career out of Indigeneity. It should also be argued that it was genetic predetermination that was to be fought and defused in those eugenicist days and their lingering aftermath. This would be uncannily (and dangerously) close to Sally Morgan's passing as Indian and to so many other cases of Aborigines passing as white. It could be taken as his attempt to secure his “survival as a black man in Western Australia”<sup>51</sup> by creating a common, existentialist front against racist oppression. Maureen Clark's research makes such a ‘misappropriation’ of identity plausible as a means for him to belong to a people and a place, but her insinuation that the author deceptively pursued an opportunity for personal gain stands or falls with Mudrooroo's admission of such intentions, while at the same time not confessing his ‘guilt’ sounds forever suspect. As there is no conclusive evidence, his silence allows him to question the challenge to his identity. By the same token, however, his silence cannot defuse, but must reinforce, his loss of credibility, making for a discursive deadlock which undermines both the authority of the Nyoongar

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<sup>49</sup> Clark, “Mudrooroo: a likely story,” 58–76; 290–302.

<sup>50</sup> “Mudrooroo: a likely story,” 301.

<sup>51</sup> Mudrooroo, “Portrait of the Artist as a Sick Old Villain,” 21 of 23.

Nation to decide on Mudrooroo's belonging and the presumption of Mudrooroo's innocence. Though Clark exhorts Mudrooroo to come forward and respond,<sup>52</sup> as Nyoongar Elders did before her, the chances that this will ever succeed are negligible in the face of the eth(n)ic limbo arising out of a discursive shift that re-employs the authentication of 'blood' to empower those who have suffered the worst of racism for more than two centuries on Australian soil. The latter explains why the Affair is inflected by an impairing inquisitional tone, as it puts the onus on Mudrooroo to 'prove' his 'racial' belonging long after eugenics were declared dead. Consequently, so far he has refused the invitation to submit to the Nyoongar protocol of Indigenous authentication, which in turn provoked Robert Eggington's irate reaction that his books should all be "pulped."<sup>53</sup>

Given the complex eth(n)ic inscription of the case, the answer as to whether Mudrooroo's refusal to engage in racial authentication should disqualify him as a person and author is not self-evident to my white, male, middle-class European mind; at the same time, applying the benefit of the doubt is problematic in the face of the history of Indigenous discrimination and genocide, and any intended impartiality could easily be seen as political bias against a minority group long discriminated against, abused, and worse. On the black count, Mudrooroo appears to get away with murder, whereas on the white count he appears to be treated with a severity beyond the nature and context of the presumed offense. The eth(n)ic extremes of the case cannot be reconciled, and this discursive clash determines the deadlock in which the Mudrooroo Affair finds itself. Is his ostracization justified or a case of excessive punishment? From an Indigenous point of view, his exclusion from Indigeneity would be perceived as a necessary and effective means to fence off Indigenous identity and interests. However, from a mainstream point of view, Mudrooroo's ostracization could be seen as 'Fanonian' violence in

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<sup>52</sup> Clark, "Mudrooroo: a likely story," 301-302.

<sup>53</sup> Shoemaker, "Mudrooroo and the Curse of Authenticity," 4. Eggington's position is more nuanced nowadays. As he explained to me in personal conversation, Dumbartung has asked local libraries not to destroy but to label Mudrooroo's books with a sticker saying he is not an Aboriginal author.

excess of its means, leaving behind a trail of undead corpses in the process of Indigenous embodiment.

### Whose Place?

According to Cassandra Pybus, Mudrooroo's fraught interpellation as an Aborigine and the taking of this to its 'logical' conclusion is only "the tip of an iceberg"<sup>54</sup> that also incorporates his generational peer, the Top End writer and activist Roberta Sykes (1943–2010), most likely also of African-American descent. Generational peers, Mudrooroo and Sykes were publicly attacked on their Indigenous identification after having become successful; as with Sally Morgan, their success has been held against them, but also suggests an uncanny cross-feed of race, gender, and class discourse. On the skin-deep racist view of the early and mid-twentieth century, Mudrooroo and Sykes were considered Indigenous, and in accepting this label Mudrooroo said he "engaged in the existential being of the black man and *did not try to escape it by claiming a fraudulent ancestry and thus incurring the guilt of an act of bad faith.*"<sup>55</sup> But what exactly would this act of 'bad faith' have been if he *had* as a youth been unequivocally aware and convinced of his biological non-Indigeneity: to accept an Indigenous identity or, on the contrary, to refuse it? Either choice seems to invoke an uncanny solicitation of solidarity and its lack. What would have been the politically correct decision there and then, in the racist Western Australia of the 1950s and 1960s? An uncanny duplicity obtains that marks what I would describe as Mudrooroo's discursive entrapment, because his words may be inscribed in a questionable regime of politics and ethics, even when his passing the inverse way, as his Koori friend Gary Foley notes,

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<sup>54</sup> Pybus, "From 'Black' Caesar to Mudrooroo," 38–39. She mentions the activist Bobbie Sykes in this respect, whose rape the perpetrators justified with her being 'Aboriginal'.

<sup>55</sup> Mudrooroo, *Milli Milli Wangka*, 261 (emphasis added). It is evident from Mudrooroo's usage of 'black' that this qualifier identified Aboriginality through skin colour in the 1960s though nowadays this is less straightforward.

was not exactly something that people were queuing up to do [and] a passport to discrimination, prejudice and poverty[;] many light-skinned Aboriginal people opted to assume a non-Aboriginal identity [...] to escape the extreme difficulty of life as an Aboriginal.<sup>56</sup>

But as Mudrooroo *did* forge a major career out of Indigeneity by 'becoming' Indigenous, his motivations became suspect and in hindsight suggested fraud.<sup>57</sup> This uneasy overlap of race and class was further compounded by Mudrooroo's complex relationship with gender, and Sally Morgan's 1987 auto/biography in particular, which has haunted his case all along. Some words on the self-defeating character of his assessment of *My Place* will tease out this issue further.

From a position of Indigenous identification and commitment Mudrooroo authored a wide-ranging and influential oeuvre in poetry, drama, prose fiction, and essays, including what long went down as the first Indigenous novel in Australia, *Wildcat Falling*,<sup>58</sup> as well as the first comprehensive study of Indigenous literature, *Writing from the Fringe* (1990). A hardliner in Indigenous affairs, Mudrooroo was "an inspiration and role model for two generations of Aboriginal people, especially for young Indigenous authors."<sup>59</sup> Though groundbreaking, his 1990 seminal study established the canons for Indigenous literary criticism in "restrictive, essentialist terms"<sup>60</sup> that uncomfortably overlapped with gender and class and whose intransigence would catch up with his own fraught belonging. His much-cited verdict on Sally Morgan's bestseller *My Place* was

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<sup>56</sup> Foley, "Muddy Waters." However, Maureen Clark suggests that Mudrooroo embraced Aboriginality as a way out of identitarian isolation and, later, as a way to forge a reputation as the first Indigenous-Australian novelist—see Clark, "Unmasking Mudrooroo," 56. The argument can, as so often in Mudrooroo's case, be taken both ways.

<sup>57</sup> The same holds for Roberta Sykes, though her political engagement as a woman as well as an 'Indigene' offered her comparably more protection from criticism.

<sup>58</sup> David Unaipon (1872–1967) of the Ngarrindjeri people from the Murray River area, South Australia, published the short-story collection *Myths and Legends of the Australian Aborigines* in 1930, but this was not a novel proper.

<sup>59</sup> Shoemaker, "Mudrooroo and the Curse of Authenticity," 4.

<sup>60</sup> "Mudrooroo and the Curse of Authenticity," 11.

exemplary of a male-chauvinist, culturally-deterministic commitment to Indigeneity as authenticity, and Maureen Clark therefore argues that “arrogant and lacking in substance, it is not unreasonable to suggest that his attack on Morgan compounded, *if not led to*, the challenge to Mudrooroo’s claim to Aboriginal heritage.”<sup>61</sup>

Mudrooroo places *My Place* within a broader discussion of Indigenous life writing whose editorial production and marketing by “the majority culture” he terms “dubious” for its focus on financial gain rather than genuine interest in the Indigenous minority. He dismisses Morgan’s novel as follows:

*My Place* by Sally Morgan (1987) has sold over 70 000 copies. This might be a sign that Aboriginal literature is moving from the fringe towards the centre. Perhaps; but if it is, it is moving into a place already created. This is ‘the battler’ genre. The plotline goes like this. Poor underprivileged person through the force of his or her own character makes it to the top through her own efforts. Sally Morgan’s book is a milestone in Aboriginal Literature in that it marks a stage when it is considered OK to be Aboriginal as long as you are young, gifted and not very black. It is an individualised story and the concerns of the Aboriginal community are of secondary importance.<sup>62</sup>

Disturbingly, this criticism can also be applied to Mudrooroo himself, which begs the question of what makes his fiction different. It is typical of his conception of Indigeneity that Mudrooroo should brandish his existentialist commitment with the Indigenous cause as the point of inflection, but this acquires a ‘darker’ reading in his disqualification of Morgan’s life writing as “*urban black women’s writing*.” As its

texts are accommodating and seek to remove themselves from controversy[, t]hey reflect how things are and do not

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<sup>61</sup> Clark, “Unmasking Mudrooroo,” 54 (emphasis added).

<sup>62</sup> Mudrooroo, *Writing from the Fringe: A Study of Modern Aboriginal Literature* (Melbourne: Hyland House, 1990): 149.

postulate any change in black/white relations in Australia; nor do they espouse any cause such as land rights, or for that matter feminism.<sup>63</sup>

Mapping race and class across gender in unfortunate ways, his positioning inevitably raised an outcry among feminist scholars.

Maureen Clark sees Mudrooroo as “particularly dogmatic and exclusive in his views on who should or should not inhabit Aboriginal cultural space” through a claim to Indigenous ancestry “that has authorised him to speak for and on behalf of Australia’s Aboriginal community.”<sup>64</sup> While Clark expresses her deep concern about the place women occupy in Mudrooroo’s discourse of racial authenticity, shifting the focus to gender as the position of critique, Mary Ann Hughes understands his intransigent vein as “a political strategy for promoting Aboriginal identity.” She points out, however, that his emphasis on identity politics “comes at the expense of many Aboriginal artists whose differences in background and creative expression create confusion over their rights to be considered Aboriginal.”<sup>65</sup> Whereas Mudrooroo’s fiction increasingly points toward the fluidity and instability of the subject,<sup>66</sup> the identity politics professed in his theoretical work “contradicted the lessons of his own literary project” and caught up with his own person<sup>67</sup> in a combination of race, class, and gender trouble. The facts and fictions of his Indigeneity were on divergent tracks and would eventually derail the theorist and author.

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<sup>63</sup> *Writing from the Fringe*, 163 (emphasis added).

<sup>64</sup> Clark, “Unmasking Mudrooroo,” 48–49.

<sup>65</sup> Mary Ann Hughes, “The Complexity of Aboriginal Identity: Mudrooroo and Sally Morgan,” *Westerly* 43.1 (1998): 24.

<sup>66</sup> Mudrooroo is notorious for renaming himself as an author—from Mudrooroo (‘paperbark’ in the Nyoongar language), to Mudrooroo Narogin, to Mudrooroo Nyoongah—and for renaming characters and rewriting plots in his fiction, as in his *Wildcat* trilogy and *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* series. The author chose 1988 to change his name from Colin Johnson to Mudrooroo as his own contribution to the ‘Bicentennial project’—see Gerhard Fischer, “Introduction” to *The Mudrooroo/Müller Project: A Theatrical Casebook*, ed. Fischer (Kensington: New South Wales UP, 1993): 1.

<sup>67</sup> Clark, “Unmasking Mudrooroo,” 53–54.



Adam Shoemaker concurs with Maureen Clark that “the invocation of a form of racial authenticity as a test for Indigeneity has, no doubt, come back to haunt the author, as has his oft-quoted, disparaging assessment of Sally Morgan’s *My Place*,”<sup>68</sup> although Indigenous women critics have taken Morgan’s novel to task for being likewise ‘inauthentic’.<sup>69</sup> In 1997, as if in an attempt to dim the public uproar about his identity, Mudrooroo published a rewrite of his groundbreaking study of Indigenous literature, now entitled *Milli Milli Wangka* (‘Paper Talk’), in which such haunting can be appreciated. His criticism of *My Place* now covers all of the prominent final chapter, punningly titled “Reconciling Our Place,” and claims academic rigor by placing *My Place*’s success within the wider socio-historic ‘matrix’ of its publication. Mudrooroo argues that *My Place* mirrors white readership’s concerns about their place in Australia, triggered off by the Bicentennial celebrations. Dealing with “Australian nationalism and identity, rather than [...] Indigenality,” it constitutes a prime example of “a literature of reconciliation” with white Australia.<sup>70</sup> Thus,

if you ask people in Australia and overseas to name a book written by an Indigenous person, they will respond by naming *My Place*. This does bring into question the author and the authority of a written text and the place in question.<sup>71</sup>

Disturbingly, these were issues that had also engaged with his person and work in the years immediately preceding the rewritten study’s publication.

Long before the Mudrooroo Affair, Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra had already profiled the similarities between the authors, placing both of them in urban middle-class positions and explaining the disturbing quality of Mudrooroo’s assessment of *My Place*:

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<sup>68</sup> Shoemaker, “Mudrooroo and the Curse of Authenticity,” 12.

<sup>69</sup> See Jackie Huggins and Marcia Langton in the previous chapter. Significantly, Sally Morgan is wrapped in self-protective silence; she lives and works secluded from public life and concedes no interviews.

<sup>70</sup> Mudrooroo, *Milli Milli Wangka*, 195–198.

<sup>71</sup> *Milli Milli Wangka*, 192.

Sally Morgan and Mudrooroo Narogin have a different problem. Because they have the benefits of white education and white modes of literary production the Aboriginalist<sup>72</sup> premise is invoked, that they couldn't be 'really Aboriginal'. Thus their right to draw on Aboriginal meanings and artistic forms is questioned [...] Aborigines' dispossession of their past and their family roots is widespread [...] So neither [Morgan nor Mudrooroo] absorbed Aboriginal traditions in the traditional way, through continuous exposure and running commentary, focused at key stages by ritual and ceremony, though each did have important Aboriginal figures in their early background. Both had to work hard to acquire the knowledge and understanding that they now possess, which in different ways forms a bedrock for their literary and artistic production. Undoubtedly what they write is not fully traditional, but that does not make it any the less Aboriginal.<sup>73</sup>

Mudrooroo's criticism of Morgan's work on the ground of Indigenous authenticity suggests the invocation of a male prerogative to decide on the nature of Indigeneity; this may be a way to set himself apart from a questioned peer whose problems of identification are too close for comfort, in their similarities as well as their differences. It cannot be coincidental that Mudrooroo shifts from using Aboriginality as a framing concept to a newly-coined 'Indigenality' throughout *Milli Milli Wangka*,<sup>74</sup> as if to evade the essentialist, exclusionary load the former imposes on him.

Mudrooroo's case differs from Morgan's in that—according to her text—she had a confirmed Indigenous bloodline and community acceptance as starting points for Indigenous identification whereas Mudrooroo staked all on lived experience; and, one could argue, because he knew he could not validate a bloodline. Yet, Penny van Toorn finds it unreasonable to treat his and similar cases of racist interpellation as identity hoaxes. In 2000, she wrote:

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<sup>72</sup> In Hodge and Mishra's view, Aboriginalism is modelled on Edward Said's *Orientalism*, in which the study of Aboriginal culture is, ultimately, a means of Western control of the colonized.

<sup>73</sup> Bob Hodge & Vijay Mishra. *Dark Side of the Dream*, 97, 101.

<sup>74</sup> Goldie, "Who is Mudrooroo?" 108.

Archie Weller bases his claim to Aboriginality on his memories of growing up with Aboriginal kids and sharing police persecution, and on his belief that he and his paternal great-grandmother look Aboriginal. Weller's efforts to trace his great-grandmother's history have so far proved inconclusive. However, [as in Mudrooroo's case,] his brother maintains: "If you grew up in a West Australian country town and you think you are Aboriginal and people think you are Aboriginal, you bloody well are." The Dumbartung Aboriginal Corporation have invited Weller to go through their protocols, presided over by Nyoongah elders, for establishing Aboriginal identity, but like Mudrooroo he has so far declined. [...] Roberta Sykes too was presumed by others to be Aboriginal. In the first volume of her autobiography, *Snake Cradle* (1997), she discloses her uncertain paternity, but recalls that at school in Townsville she was called 'boong', 'black gin' and 'Abo'. At seventeen she was gang-raped by four white men, one of whom stood up at his trial and shouted, "What the hell, she's an Abo! She's just a fucking boong!" Sykes has clearly suffered with Aboriginal people, and fought alongside them politically. Her long-term involvement in Aboriginal politics, often at considerable cost to herself, seems to have shielded her from much of the acrimonious media criticism levelled at Mudrooroo, and to a lesser extent at Weller. Mudrooroo, Weller and Sykes are to be distinguished from Streten Bozic ('B. Wongar') and Leon Carmen ('Wanda Koolmatrie') who, while adopting Aboriginal pen-names, were never *involuntarily* interpellated as Aboriginal.<sup>75</sup>

From this perspective, Mudrooroo's identity may appear an ambiguous mis/appropriation as, for practical and material reasons, the definition of Indigeneity became paradoxically more grassroots as well as more exclusionary after the Mabo decision. Although

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<sup>75</sup> Van Toorn, "Indigenous texts and narratives," 42–43. Significantly, Mudrooroo's and Weller's brothers concur in the view that racist interpellation entitles one to an Indigenous identity.

Mudrooroo's response to the racial oppression of his younger days may by hindsight seem dubious in light of his success and therefore strangely complicit with the white lie of racial supremacy, there are also enough counterarguments to assume it may have been "well-meant"<sup>76</sup> and a commitment to solidarity within a prior constellation of language, knowledge, and power. This should draw attention to the absence of a suitable identitarian niche for non-Indigenous black Australians—indeed, as he claims in a 2012 piece, how could a black man possibly survive in those racist years in Western Australia? Mudrooroo cannot be held responsible for the vagaries of identity politics and the kinds of oppression these may have generated over the years. Cassandra Pybus writes that at this stage no one can gain by belated accusations of fraud against the likes of Mudrooroo, Roberta Sykes, and so many others with "mistaken assumptions about their racial identity." Yet, she echoes Rosemary van den Berg's words when she argues:

it makes a mockery of Aboriginal rights and Indigenous culture to assert that a non-Indigenous black ancestor could confer the same status, and the same rights and privileges, as the descendants of the people who were forcibly dispossessed and subjected to genocidal regimes.<sup>77</sup>

Mudrooroo can no longer hold on to Indigeneity as *his* identity; thus, his case evidences that, whereas the racial binaries subjacent in essentialist versions of identity politics can lead to positions of political leverage, in their more complex exclusions for the sake of embodiment they tend to cause collateral damage in the demand for clear, discrete boundaries. What is more, whenever the likeness of the 'fraudulent' to the 'authentic' is at its uncanniest, because too close for comfort and hardest to unpack as inherently 'different', the appeal to personal ethics is at its greatest, as Rosemary van den Berg's criticism may serve to demonstrate.

The existence of collateral damage in Indigenous incorporation begs the question of the extent to which the ethnic 'space-between'

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<sup>76</sup> Clark, "Unmasking Mudrooroo," 59.

<sup>77</sup> Pybus, "From 'Black' Caesar to Mudrooroo," 39.

(Bhabha's "third space") can be justly and effectively managed. The art historian Ian McLean borrows the phrase "burden of representation" from the British critic Kobena Mercer to describe such eth(n)ic embodiment. As he explains, Indigenous artists are required to address issues of race on the stage of identity politics, which he considers ultimately reinstating precisely the racialist boundaries and colonialist repression such policies aim to undo.<sup>78</sup> There surely is a very thin line to be walked here. Literary theory has long taught us that it is questionable to read the author back into the text, although the genre of Indigenous life writing certainly gives rise to, and justifies, such critical maneuvers. In confrontative ways, Mudrooroo's fiction urges us to do precisely that; yet, we can and may not judge the quality of a text through the life of its author,<sup>79</sup> and the Mudrooroo corpus therefore deserves, like Sally Morgan's oeuvre, a flexible analytical framework. Homi Bhabha opts for a definition of culture which "is less about expressing a pre-given identity [...] and more about the activity of negotiating, regulating and authorizing competing, often conflicting demands for collective self-representation."<sup>80</sup> Building on Bhabha's premise, Annalisa Oboe opts for a performative approach toward Mudrooroo's identity, agency, and oeuvre:

[it is] more fruitful to investigate how Mudrooroo's writing re-stages the drama of subjectivity in terms of 'articulation' rather than 'authentication' [...] there is no denying that Mudrooroo has always been a highly ambiguous character, a first-class shape-shifter who apparently enjoys the freedom that comes from never sticking too long to any one position, name or style of writing: for Mudrooroo, constant change is apparently a powerful strategy which prevents him from succumbing to the pictures constructed for him by his readers

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<sup>78</sup> Ian McLean, "Aboriginalism: White Aborigines and Australian Nationalism," *Australian Humanities Review* 11 (May–August 1998), <http://www.lib.latrobe.edu.au/AHR/> (accessed 2 June 2005).

<sup>79</sup> Shoemaker, "Mudrooroo and the Curse of Authenticity," 4: "Some Indigenous spokesmen, such as Robert Eggington in Perth, called for Mudrooroo's books to be removed from educational syllabi and for his novels to be pulped."

<sup>80</sup> Homi Bhabha, "The Manifesto," *Wasafiri* 29 (Spring 1999): 38.

and critics, but which seems also in tune with a view of Aboriginality as 'unstable' and shifting.<sup>81</sup>

If the analysis of the performative qualities of Mudrooroo's work is a way out of a discursive deadlock, this should investigate his fiction's engagement with the parameters of class, race, and gender in the author's postcolonizing spectralization.

For instance, Mudrooroo's misogynist criticism of Sally Morgan worryingly resurfaces in the working title of his projected autobiography: *Not My Place*?<sup>82</sup> Maureen Clark had already leveled censure:

his failure to acknowledge the positive contribution of females, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, in weaving the Australian social fabric. The central interest of much of Mudrooroo's work is to restore the lost prestige of Aboriginal males, but he tends to do so at the expense of females from both sides of the racial divide.<sup>83</sup>

She illustrates this with his staging of a female vampire as the "brutish" symbol of Western colonialism in his latest novels: "By invoking the 'phallocratic' concept of her as 'vagina dentata'—the castrating woman of legend—he represents the female as the ultimate cause and regenerator of all man's ills."<sup>84</sup> Mudrooroo claims to be critically aware of the structural link between patriarchy, colonialism, and racism,<sup>85</sup> but his negative treatment of the feminine poises his fiction's liberating potential in the realm of the politically-

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<sup>81</sup> Annalisa Oboe, "Introduction" to *Mongrel Signatures*, ed. Oboe (Cross/Cultures 64; Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2003): xi. Mudrooroo wrote: "Am I to write a fictional life story as others have done to prove who I am. I never knew my father and even my mother is in doubt. So just see me as a mongrel and forget any other labels"—see Mudrooroo, "Biographical: The Global Nomad," at *Mudrooroo.com.The Authors Complex* (April 2003) [www.mudrooroo.com](http://www.mudrooroo.com) (accessed 3 March 2016).

<sup>82</sup> See Mudrooroo, "Biographical: The Global Nomad."

<sup>83</sup> Clark, "Unmasking Mudrooroo," 52-53.

<sup>84</sup> "Unmasking Mudrooroo," 52-53 (emphasis added).

<sup>85</sup> Mudrooroo, *Us Mob: History, Culture, Struggle: An Introduction to Indigenous Australia* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1995): 4-5.

incorrect and uncanny. While he claims that “a fixed category is not [his] scene,”<sup>86</sup> the question remains whether the lack of commitment and allegiance this implies is ultimately enabling. Consequently, his Vampire trilogy reads as a call for freedom as much as a cry against entrapment.

Mudrooroo’s Vampire trilogy consists of *The Undying* (1998), *Underground* (1999), and *The Promised Land* (2000) and develops out of two preceding novels, *Doctor Wooreddy’s Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World* (1983) and *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* (1991). They make for a series of five that spans and bridges different stages in Australian race relations at the crucial end of the twentieth century. His revisiting and rewriting of genre, subject matter, events, and characters over a period of almost two decades parallels the multiple identities the author has been written into and out of by himself and others. As in Sally Morgan’s case, the only way out of this uncanny confusion seems to be to refuse the castrating oedipal narrative and instead to adoption a perspective that Annalisa Oboe defines as “productively impure.”<sup>87</sup> That is, a postcolonizing definition of Mudrooroo’s person and work in terms of performative promiscuity would enable the linking of his redemptive (re)configurations of fact and fiction to the feminine. This would explain Mudrooroo’s vexed insistence on Indigenous descent through a *maternal* link<sup>88</sup> and his troubled employment of a *female* vampire as the locus of hybridization.

### Mudrooroo: The Fictions Behind the Facts

Mudrooroo’s Vampire trilogy *The Undying*, *Underground*, and *The Promised Land* can be read independently but can also be included in the so-called ‘Master’ quartet, starting off with *Master of the Ghost*

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<sup>86</sup> Shoemaker, “Mudrooroo and the Curse of Authenticity,” 9.

<sup>87</sup> Oboe, “Introduction,” xvii. She mentions his claim for descent from the Bibbulmun mob. In 2012, Mudrooroo only resorts to nineteenth-century frontier relationships between male settlers and Nyoongar women to make his claim for Indigeneity.

<sup>88</sup> Maureen Clark, “Terror as White Female in Mudrooroo’s Vampire Trilogy,” *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 41.2 (2006): 122.

*Dreaming* (1991), published just before his Indigenous identity was publicly called into question. This points to *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* as the key text in a series of four spanning the crucial Age of Mabo. Yet, the latter text itself reworks *Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World* (1983).<sup>89</sup> Thus, the development of the Vampire trilogy must be understood from the perspective of these two earlier novels together.

*Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription* and *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* fictionalize the vicissitudes of the few 'authentic' Aborigines<sup>90</sup> who survived the British genocidal policies in Tasmania known as the Black War (mid-1820s–32) and were confined to a mission reserve just off the Tasmanian coast on Flinders Island, in the 1830s. Both novels, under different guises and following different plots, concentrate on the historical George Augustus Robinson from the perspective of his male Indigenous guide, a shaman/maban. Robinson was a social parvenu who attempted to escape from poor lower-class origins; he acquired prominence in Tasmanian history as a self-styled white missionary and anthropologist who was officially appointed 'Conciliator and Protector of the Aboriginal People'. A prolific writer and linguist, whose "voluminous journals [...] have been and continue to be used as important historical records,"<sup>91</sup> he was a highly untrustworthy character who "invented himself" into a "heroicized and fictive persona"<sup>92</sup> but repeatedly betrayed his Indigenous wards' trust.<sup>93</sup> Robinson's account of the successes of his "conciliating" efforts toward the few surviving full-blood Indigenes are in stark contrast with "his disastrous attempts to establish a 'Friendly Mission;,' it would effectively rid the small island of its

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<sup>89</sup> Further references to these two novels by *Doctor* and *Master* only in this chapter.

<sup>90</sup> It was long argued that the Indigenous Tasmanians had disappeared, not taking into account interracial off-spring, which was supposed to absorb and assimilate into the white mainstream according to eugenic thinking.

<sup>91</sup> Maggie Nolan, "Identity Crises and Orphaned Rewriting," in *Mongrel Signatures: Reflections on the Work of Mudrooroo*, ed. Annalisa Oboe (Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2003): 117.

<sup>92</sup> Gerry Turcotte, "Remastering the Ghosts: Mudrooroo and Gothic Reconfigurations," in *Mongrel Signatures: Reflections on the Work of Mudrooroo*, ed. Annalisa Oboe (Cross/Cultures 64; Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2003): 132.

<sup>93</sup> See Vivienne Rae-Ellis, *Black Robinson, Protector of Aborigines* (Melbourne: Melbourne UP, 1988).



Aboriginal inhabitants and so leave it free for white settlement.”<sup>94</sup> In his attempt to recover an empowering Indigenous past, Mudrooroo developed a “career-long fascination”<sup>95</sup> for this colonial parvenu and engaged in the deconstruction and rewriting of this white trickster figure and the role his historical Indigenous companions Trugernanna (Truganini) and Wooreddy played in the latter’s exploits.

### **From Gothic to Maban Reality**

The relatively long period between the publication of the two novels marks a significant development in Mudrooroo’s literary project, engaged as he was in deconstructing a “eurocentric notion of Aboriginality” and “undermin[ing] European historiography.”<sup>96</sup> Jodi Brown is supportive of Mudrooroo’s reconstruction of Indigenous history in *Doctor Wooreddy’s Prescription*, pointing out that he “interrogates a genocidal past in order to help heal the cultural fracture within contemporary Aboriginal communities.” Nevertheless, she does find fault with his use of genre, which still vaunts the linear, progressive, and finite development of action and character of the traditional novel that prioritizes a European worldview:

marginal writings may find themselves attacking the discourses (in history, literature and politics) whose dominance is paradoxically reaffirmed by the very process of reiterating, from a marginalized position, the structures that are being opposed. Doctor Wooreddy, for example, with its linear chronology, closed plot and representation of character, does display a conventional European realist

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<sup>94</sup> Turcotte, “Remastering the Ghosts,” 130.

<sup>95</sup> Clark, “Unmasking Mudrooroo,” 57.

<sup>96</sup> Turcotte, “Remastering the Ghosts,” 129.

organisation thus re-confirming, in a sense, the dominant mode of European discourse.<sup>97</sup>

Although subversion is served in the empowering reversal of narrative point of view and in the mocking description of the Protector of the Aborigines, Indigenous defeat permeates *Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription* from beginning to end, and its linearity and inevitable closure operate as a narrative trap. Thus, the title announces the destruction of the Indigenous universe and this apocalyptic vision informs all attempts on the part of "the good Doctor"<sup>98</sup> to record Indigenous culture mentally as a "travelling encyclopedia"<sup>99</sup> or dark double of the white anthropologist; yet, the lonely death of this shaman without biological and spiritual offspring fails to preserve Indigenous culture. Despite the innovative treatment, which "de-Gothicises Aboriginality [...] first by reversing and then by subverting the [...] binary oppositions" of the Indigenous as bloodthirsty and the white invaders as ghosts,<sup>100</sup> the novel's conclusion is bleak and lacking hope, echoing the resignation in Wooreddy's oft-repeated comment, "It is the times."<sup>101</sup>

This would prove Gerry Turcotte right, who holds that Gothic discourse simultaneously enables the settler's expression and silences the settled-upon, so that Indigenous writers in general avoid the use of the genre.<sup>102</sup> Thus, Mudrooroo discovers the story's

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<sup>97</sup> Jodie Brown, "Unlearning Dominant Modes of Representation: Mudrooroo's *Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World* and Robert Drewe's *The Savage Crows*," *Westerly* 3 (Spring 1993): 74.

<sup>98</sup> Mudrooroo, *Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World* (1983; Melbourne: Hyland House, 1996): 40.

<sup>99</sup> Craig Tapping, "Literary Reflections of Orality: Colin Johnson's *Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World*," *World Literature Written in English* 30.2 (1990): 57.

<sup>100</sup> Penny van Toorn, "The Terrors of Terra Nullius: Gothicising and De-Gothicising Aboriginality," *World Literature Written in English* 32.2-33.1 (1992-93): 94-95.

<sup>101</sup> Mudrooroo, "Doctor Wooreddy," 9. This meek statement is uncannily echoed in Mudrooroo's public comment on his identity trouble: "What happens, happens" (Shoemaker, "Mudrooroo and the Curse of Authenticity," 5).

<sup>102</sup> Gerry Turcotte, "Vampiric Decolonization: Fanon, 'Terrorism' and Mudrooroo's Vampire Trilogy," in *Postcolonial Whiteness: A Critical Reader on Race and Empire*, ed. Alfred J. Lopez (Albany: State U of New York P, 2005): 105.

postcolonizing potential, recasting *Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription* as *Master of the Ghost Dreaming*, introducing significant innovations in content and form. Names change to rewrite identities: Robinson becomes Fada, an Indigenous phonetic transcription of 'Father' which mocks the significance of his mission; Wooreddy becomes Jangamuttuk, the problem solver who is no longer a failed, doomed copy of the white 'anthropologist' but enacts Homi Bhabha's colonial mimicry to adapt songlines to the new times; and Trugernanna, Wooreddy's untrustworthy companion, becomes the steadfast Ludjee, actively engaged in the liberating Ghost Dreaming. The plot, which still draws on similar settings and situations, is reinscribed in a search for adaptation, transformation, and survival which is brought to a hopeful end: "As for our band of intrepid voyagers, their further adventures on the way to and in their promised land await to be chronicled, and will be the subject of further volumes."<sup>103</sup>

Following the conventions of the nineteenth-century adventure novel, this postscript is an ironic wink at, rather than a confirmation of, European realist narrative. It agrees with the agenda of stylistic blurring and hybridizing Mudrooroo applies to the text as a whole which he termed Maban Reality. In Maban Reality, "Aboriginal characters transform themselves from tricksters to warriors, from birds to animals,"

and we are in a world where those old fixities of European natural reality, such as conformity to character and to species, do not exist. The problems of characterisation in conventional natural reality texts, which again stem from earlier notions of a certain linearity of character, a Freudian soul as it were which keeps the character straight and united by childhood memories and persecutions, does not obtain.<sup>104</sup>

Thus, *Master's* introduction of Maban Reality was perceived as "an exciting new development in Australian fiction, which is likely to

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<sup>103</sup> Mudrooroo, *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* (North Ryde, NSW: Collins/Angus & Robertson, 1991): 148.

<sup>104</sup> Mudrooroo, *Milli Milli Wangka*, 104. One should note the reference to Freud in his explanation.

have significant impact upon the next generation of Aboriginal writers.”<sup>105</sup> In conceiving of Maban Reality, Mudrooroo made a significant contribution to the empowering incorporation of Dreaming narrative into postcolonizing fiction, what we have called Aboriginal Reality in this study.

Mudrooroo sees Maban Reality as akin to Magical Realism: it “might be characterized by a firm grounding in the reality of the earth or country, together with an acceptance of the supernatural as part of everyday reality,” and entails “describing a world which is existent and as real as that constructed by European thought.”<sup>106</sup> This definition aims to record the ongoing physical and spiritual connection of Aborigines with the land as tangible as well as textually-imaginative, never ceded in the process of colonization:

Colonisation was also a linguistic and cognitive process that falsely projected a universal [European] understanding of land. Relationships to land, in terms of knowledge and ownership, are in process, in *creation*.<sup>107</sup>

Thus, Maban Reality also takes issue with the all-pervading monolithic colonial world construct based on the natural sciences.<sup>108</sup> Its imposition was needed to control a potentially harmful Other: “The beast must become tamed, static and able to be petted, examined and made known. It cannot be strange, it must be scientifically acceptable” (90). Its imposition also meant the suppression of the universe of magic embodied in the shaman/maban. To deconstruct the aboriginalist take on Western knowledge, Mudrooroo configures Maban Reality both as a literary recovery of the shamanic universe and as a cultural-political project against Indigenous dispossession in the broadest sense (89), combining oral Indigenous history and Dreamtime storying into

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<sup>105</sup> John Barnes, “Mudrooroo—An Australian View,” *European Association for the Study of Australia Newsletter* 20 (1999): 3.

<sup>106</sup> Mudrooroo, *Milli Milli Wangka*, 97–98.

<sup>107</sup> Clare Archer-Lean, “Place, Space and Tradition in the Writings of Mudrooroo” in *Mongrel Signatures: Reflections on the Work of Mudrooroo*, ed. Annalisa Oboe (Cross/Cultures 64; Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2003): 221.

<sup>108</sup> Mudrooroo, *Milli Milli Wangka*, 91. Further page references are in the main text.

Aboriginal Reality. Mudrooroo particularly calls on the adaptability of the novel

to deconstruct the awful invader history of Australia and Indigenize it through such devices as Maban Reality. In this way, we present a history of the native, rather than of the colonialist, in a startling way which the native may recognize as her own. (13)

To the European mind, the interaction of two such incommensurable worlds is problematic and may seek release in the uncanny:

different from [...] natural scientific reality [...] this world, this reality, may be familiar as well as strange [...] opening [...] the doors of perception through language and imagination. Thus the reader is led to question what he or she once accepted as 'true' and 'real'. (98)

Clare Archer-Lean therefore holds that “there are no clearly locatable binaries here—scientific and rational ‘reality’, imagined and created ‘fantasy’.”<sup>109</sup> This turns the Indigenous novel into a ghost that, from the margins of cultural difference, promotes postcolonial unsettledness as existential anxiety. Mudrooroo claims that eurocentric postmodernism attempts to contain this anguish by commodifying other cultures and identities as unproblematic and expendable.<sup>110</sup> Maban Reality therefore addresses postmodernism as an unsettling psychological condition, because “postmodernism is not a monolithic structure [...] it is quite *schizophrenic* [...] so that myriad realities may exist within it.”<sup>111</sup>

### Engaging the Ghost Dreaming

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<sup>109</sup> Archer-Lean, “Place, Space and Tradition,” 204.

<sup>110</sup> Mudrooroo, *Milli Milli Wangka*, 104.

<sup>111</sup> *Milli Milli Wangka*, 105 (emphasis added).

In line with Maban Reality's postcolonizing agenda, *Master's* most significant feature is its action on a level of consciousness difficult to grasp for Westerners; Indigenous characters are liberated from the constraints of the Christian mission reserve and move around freely with their totemic Dreaming companions, successfully battling monstrous shape-changing creatures that represent colonialism. The uncanny obtains in the defamiliarization of the quest novel, familiar in shape yet strange in content. Whereas the Indigenous world is 'de-Gothicized', the non-Indigenous world embodies the ghostly "beast that must become tamed," and the Dreamtime is unsettled by the ghostly colonialist presence. Nevertheless, the Indigenes face up to this bleak monster, defying Wooreddy's apocalyptic vision through their Ghost Dreaming.

Thus, the opening pages of *Master* throw the reader headlong into an Indigenous ceremony led by the elderly, experienced Jangamuttuk, who enacts a process of *reverse* colonization. In a perfect example of colonial mimicry, the ceremony mixes traditional ritual of music and dance with Western-style hairdo, body painting, and convict ballads. Adapting physical form, the maban controls the spiritual:

Jangamuttuk, creator and choreographer, checked the company for flaws before the body of the ceremony began. He was not after a realist copy, after all he had no intention of aping the European, but sought for an adaptation of these alien cultural forms appropriate to his own cultural matrix. It was an exciting concept; but it was more than this. There was a ritual need for it to be done. The need for the inclusion of these elements into a ceremony with a far different purpose than mere art.<sup>112</sup>

The shaman's agenda places the application of 'realism' within harmful assimilation and adapts Western culture in order to safeguard survival. Thus, the performative elements of the ritual configure a transgressive and transformative quality that highlights a conception of Indigeneity as adaptable to specific needs, and able to

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<sup>112</sup> Mudrooroo, *Master of the Ghost Dreaming*, 3.

respond to new circumstances, a feature that is also present in Kim Scott's *That Deadman Dance*. As Eva Rask Knudsen writes,

Mudrooroo transgresses the confines of the European realist genre from the very first page of *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* by inserting the story into the narrative framework of myth and the performative context of decolonising ceremony.<sup>113</sup>

This performative quality is in stark contrast to Fada's faulty pseudo-anthropological analysis of this "realist copy" of the "mass of the Popish Church of Rome."<sup>114</sup> Thus, the missionary fails to pick up on the intimate link between form and content in the Indigenous Dreaming: employing "parodic mimicry" to exorcise the ills of colonization, the ritual is much more than an emulation of church ceremonial for the mere enjoyment of Europeans.<sup>115</sup> Content in the Indigenous conception of culture cannot exist separately from form, and form has to be respected in order to achieve transformative power. This is in line with Mudrooroo's critique of the postmodernist commodification of identity as expendable form,<sup>116</sup> which is displayed in the missionary family, who flee from the "dreadful" island in mock farewell procession, after common European illnesses, malnutrition, starvation, and general grief at dispossession have provoked a tremendously high Indigenous death rate. Thus, the sarcastic food metaphor "What does he do, *eat 'em?*"<sup>117</sup> conjures up the commodification of expendable Indigenous bodies, which foreshadows subsequent fictional development in the Vampire trilogy.

In the magical universe of the Ghost Dreaming, danger is significantly figured as feminine, with the Protector's wife's colonial dis-ease echoing the Indigenes' sickened condition (106–107).

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<sup>113</sup> Eva Rask Knudsen, "Mudrooroo's Encounters with the Missionaries," in *Mongrel Signatures: Reflections on the Work of Mudrooroo*, ed. Annalisa Oboe (Cross/Cultures 64; Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2003): 174.

<sup>114</sup> Mudrooroo, *Master of the Ghost Dreaming*, 12.

<sup>115</sup> *Master of the Ghost Dreaming*, 10.

<sup>116</sup> Mudrooroo, *Milli Milli Wangka*, 104.

<sup>117</sup> Mudrooroo, *Master of the Ghost Dreaming*, 135 (emphasis added). Further page references are in the main text.

Trapped in wifeness and motherhood, Mada is drug-dependent, and Jangamuttuk captures the laudanum “that would bring health to his people” (12). As the drug is counterproductive, Jangamuttuk’s Ghost Dreaming must engage with the gender mechanics of Mada’s family unit. Mada/Mother’s name symbolizes the material and spiritual perfection of European civilization, but she is far removed from the purity of body and mind exemplified in the Biblical Mother Mary. Likewise, Fada/Father’s civilizing mission is corrupted by his self-serving colonial careerism and dark temptations of the flesh. Their offspring, son/Sonny, is unable to assume the role of spiritual leader of the flock but leaves control in the hands of Wadawaka, a black African adopted into the mission mob who emulates Jesus Christ as the savior of the dispersed group of Aborigines. Thus, Sonny ends up a solitary (and ironically stereotypical) drunk after the mission compound has been destroyed by the shaman’s magic reconnection to country (146).

The self-destructive white reenactment of the Holy Family appears to register the failure of the colonial project most saliently in female corruption and aberration. In a Dreaming trance, Jangamuttuk finds a “ghost female [...] on a platform covered with the softest of skins”:

She was fair to behold. Stark white and luminescent was her skin beneath which, pulsing blue with health, Jangamuttuk could see the richness of her blood. Her lips were of the reddest ochre and her cheeks were rosy and glowing with good health. Her firm breasts rose and fell. She slept the sleep of a being seemingly content in body and spirit, but Jangamuttuk with his insight knew that this was an illusion. A wave of ill-feeling from her nightmare shivered her form and before his eyes the fair illusion of her face twisted with a hunger which might never be satisfied [...] the eyes of the ghost female sprang open. Blue and utterly cold, they held him. Wrenched from a dream in which she was on the verge of finally and utterly achieving complete satisfaction, her hunger erupted in a scream of rage at the human. The female sprang at him. Before the claws could fasten on his throat, he regained his power and sprang aside. (15)



In this Gothic sequence, mutually-exclusive images from the realm of legend and myth are juxtaposed: Mada changes from the attractive, courtly Sleeping Beauty into a ravenous sexually deprived vampiress, a notion driven home by the use of Stokerian vocabulary. The Indigenous quest for relief provokes voyeurism, sexual attraction, fear and loathing of the female Other, and develops into actual seduction when Jangamuttuk “steals her prize,” the laudanum. As this unsettling scene of Indigenous male empowerment is located at the very beginning of the novel, it determines the remaining action through Jangamuttuk’s Dream contact with Mada. In her discussion of this encounter, Lyn McCredden observes:

It is necessary, of course, to read Jangamuttuk’s journey in the larger terms of the novel’s concern for aboriginal genocide and survival. But it is surely worrying, in this episode, and in a number of others in the novel, that the maternal and female is compressed with the colonial power as the site of struggle. Mudrooroo’s Mada figure comes close to Kristeva’s abject space, the maternal identified with death, the struggle for individuation through suppression of the female. (15)

The above rings true for the whole of the Master series, in which Mada’s vampire dreaming reaches its full thrust in *Amelia Fraser*.

Yet, Mudrooroo writes womanhood up in *Master of the Ghost Dreaming*, provided it is Indigenous. Ludjee counters Mada’s identification with the abject. She is ‘pure’ in not giving in to Fada’s sexual desire (49) but sexually empowered, forcing the missionary to profess falsely, “Such restraints were what made the British Empire great. Such restraints were derived from the teaching of his religion” (46). Fada’s sketches of Ludjee masquerade sexual desire as anthropological interest,<sup>118</sup> and her depiction as a Black Venus of Botticelli is in stark contrast to his repulsion at Mada’s body:

He stopped as Ludjee’s head rose above the edge of the headland. This was followed by her breasts, her waist, her

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<sup>118</sup> Significantly, his drawing skills are taken over by the female vampire, Amelia, in later novels.

hips [...] Fada was entranced. Such a primal scene [...] His sketch did not quite do it justice. Not quite, but he *had* captured the finer points of this woman posed on the very edge of the rampant ocean.<sup>119</sup>

Sandro Botticelli's "The Birth of Venus" or "Venus on the half-shell" (c.1482) is a metaphor for the 'rebirth' of Western civilization after the Middle Ages but here relocated in Indigenous regeneration. Mudrooroo adapts the Renaissance image to debunk Robinson's self-interested civilizing zeal and colonization at large. The beach scene echoes the erotic subtext of Jangamuttuk's earlier encounter with Mada in the Ghost Dreaming. Rising from the sea, Ludjee offers shellfish to her husband and ignores Fada, who, in sexual arousal, had unsuccessfully proposed to do some "shellfish hunting" at the beach (50). These references to shellfish are by no means gratuitous; they hark back to the contained eroticism of Venus's nude display on a shell in Botticelli's painting and are therefore full of sexual innuendo. The male gaze informs both scenes, but whereas in Jangamuttuk's case they link to sexual conquest, in Fada's they produce sexual failure and the unattainability of the Indigenous-female Other.

Ludjee's ancestral spirit connection to the sea, symbolized by her totemic companion Manta Ray, is necessary to win the postcolonizing Dreaming battle. Jangamuttuk's growing awareness of this marks the point where, narratively speaking, Maban Reality/Mudrooroo transforms and empowers black femininity, inscribing the text more fully as an instance of Aboriginal Reality. The following scene is strategically placed after some origin stories on male and female Law transmitted during initiation rites:

The female power surged within her; ancestors were connected in an unbroken line. The grid of the Female Dreaming flowed with energy. She dived into the water in a quick flowing motion which took her under. Fada frowned in annoyance, but *she was beyond his control. She was free in her*

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<sup>119</sup> Mudrooroo, *Master of the Ghost Dreaming*, 63. Further page references are in the main text.

*tradition* [...] she felt herself expanding to become as wide as the ocean and as terrible as its battering waves. This was true woman's country and women alone could make the connection. Men and ghosts needed boats and ships; but all she needed was the strength of her body and her connection to her Dreaming. Her arms were fins, her legs a tail; her lungs gills [...] Her Dreaming companion, Manta Ray gently nudged her with her back. They had missed each other. Now they were together again and she settled onto the back of her companion [...] as Manta Ray raced off. What had taken her away from this power and this companion? The ghosts had sung her, made her lose her Dreaming and languish in misery, her femininity imprisoned in dreary ghost clothing which hindered all movement and action. Now she was free of it. Free—and the ray broke the surface of the water and flew into the air. (59–60, emphasis added)

Once again Mudrooroo reworks tradition to signal the way out of compromising new circumstances and refuses uncritical assimilation of the colonizer's ways, rewriting through Ludjee the important but dubious role in contact-history ascribed to Trugernanna in official mainstream records.<sup>120</sup> However, Jangamuttuk's protagonism gives primacy to her lesser-known historical companion Wooreddy in delivering a postcolonizing interpretation of contact-fiction. As if to underscore a male prerogative in the literary fight for freedom, a concept of pan-Indigeneity is forged by the inclusion of a non-Indigenous black man; Wadawaka, a powerful African, becomes the

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<sup>120</sup> Turcotte, "Remastering the Ghosts," 136–137. Variant spellings of Trugernanna's name occur in mainstream records and academic papers. Her nickname Lalla Rooke, after an Oriental princess, is also used by George Augustus Robinson in *The Promised Land* (Mudrooroo, *The Promised Land*, 113). Regarding the latter 'aristocratic touch', see Greg Lehman, "Trukanini," in *The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture*, ed. Sylvia Kleinert & Margo Neale (Melbourne: Oxford UP, 2000): 722. Lehman points out that "Trukanini (1812–1876) was the daughter of Mangana, leader of the Nuenone nations and grew up on Bruny Island, one of the first places in Tasmania invaded by Europeans [...] she is undoubtedly the most famous Tasmanian Aborigine ever to have lived. But there is irony in her fame. During her later years she was celebrated as 'Queen of her race' and paraded before visiting royalty" by the white community.

third traveler necessary to complete the Indigenous voyage into spiritual and material recovery.<sup>121</sup>

### The African Connection

Penal transport in the nineteenth century also included black Africans who had committed offenses at different slave stations in the Empire.<sup>122</sup> The rebel Wadawaka is transported from Benin to the convict colony and adopted by Jangamuttuk's mob to form part of a hybrid collection of lost Indigenes from different tribes. Racial oppression works through division: missions are "institutionalised places of segregation [...] emblematic of the colonial endeavour to confine and control Aboriginal people and their means of cultural expression."<sup>123</sup> Yet, Wadawaka's shared blackness fuels Fada's fear of rebellion, only sublimated by his faulty anthropological analysis of the African's ritual scars; this paradoxically underlines how an inclusionary definition of Indigeneity can be constitutive of political engagement and organization:

He sternly examined the ex-slave and tried to find the evil mind of a rebel bent on destruction and mayhem beneath the pleasant face striving to remain fixed in an absolute lack of expression [...] Then, the anthropologist replaced the missionary and he stared with amazement at the tribal markings, the cicatrices of adulthood on the African chest, which were exactly the same as those of his own native community [...] "Sir, if I may say so, [Those markings on your chest] bear an uncanny resemblance to the markings our own natives have on their chests and shoulders. Never in my wildest imagination did I believe that there existed a connection between this remote colony and Africa.

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<sup>121</sup> Perhaps tellingly for the author's conflictive treatment of gender, in subsequent novels Wadawaka engages in a troubling relationship with the female vampire, Amelia.

<sup>122</sup> For an elaborate discussion of the African diaspora in Australia, see Pybus, "From 'Black' Caesar to Mudrooroo."

<sup>123</sup> Rask Knudsen, "Mudrooroo's Encounters with the Missionaries," 168.

Impossible, but it must be so, for I find it impossible that a man such as yourself who has had the benefits of the civilising process should revert to the darkest savagery of which these poor souls are still in thrall. Sir, I am well aware that Africa has been the cradle of ancient cultures.<sup>124</sup>

Fada's unsettling hypothesis bears the seed of a larger truth; the text claims Indigeneity through a cultural kinship model rather than through the bio-genetic narrative of the natural sciences. Thus, it locates Indigenous power and resilience in a conceptual 'dark' space across genetic and geographical borders. Therefore,

the collage-like quality to [Mudrooroo's] work, in terms of culturally Indigenous referents, appears to be a mapping of a textual landscape which, thematically and geographically, encompasses pan-Aboriginal empowerment.<sup>125</sup>

Significantly, Wadawaka is a hybrid in many senses: not only is he adopted into Indigenous culture, but his birth on the Middle Passage is reflected in his name, meaning "Born on the Waters."<sup>126</sup> As a seafarer or water-walker (phonetically transcribed as 'Wada-waka'), he is both the vivid expression of uprootedness and the living result of violent displacement: as a landless "water man [...] all that he had was the ocean moving under him" (85). Yet, he is also an unlikely religious double, a black savior who like Jesus Christ is able 'to walk on water', and, as a product of cross-cultural contact with Europeans, able to bridge taboo areas of male and female Law, which assign the earth to men and the sea to women. An expert seaman, Wadawaka teaches the Aborigines to rig and sail the schooner that takes them to freedom at the end of *Master*. An inclusionary vision of Indigeneity is therefore wrought, able to adapt to new circumstances in empowering ways.

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<sup>124</sup> Mudrooroo, *Master of the Ghost Dreaming*, 76–77.

<sup>125</sup> Archer-Lean, "Place, Space and Tradition," 214.

<sup>126</sup> Mudrooroo, *Master of the Ghost Dreaming*, 77. Further page references are in the main text.

Jangamuttuk, Wadawaka, and Ludjee enter the Ghost Dreaming as a dark double of the Holy Family to confront the terrors of a colonialist hell. The Indigenous intervention achieves Mada's healing reconciliation with her husband, their leaving the island mission, and freedom for its Indigenous wards (125). Colonial displacement is resolved in a retreat to origins, erasing settler presence (147) and sparking off an Indigenous quest for territorial repossession. As Wadawaka provides the hybrid knowledge to guide the dispossessed Aborigines on this quest, he may also remind us of the author himself as the skillful navigator through his fiction, arguably with a marked personal interest in 'plotting' a course of inclusionary black empowerment. As the first uncertainties about Mudrooroo's Indigenous identity presumably arose as late as 1992,<sup>127</sup> it is difficult to maintain that the author consciously created a literary project that would enable him to ward off foreseeable future problems on the identity front. Nevertheless, the shadow of deceit looms large, as it remains worrying that an ambiguous, hybrid character reminiscent of the author— orphaned, African, without clear tribal links, rebellious, intelligent, and domineering—is crucially inscribed in a text preceding the notorious *Affair*, or, as Mudrooroo would recently declare, well before "the shit hit the fan and sprayed all over me."<sup>128</sup> In 1997 Mudrooroo concluded that "what has happened to me is to realize the absurdity seeking a racial identity away from what I believe I am. Whatever my identity is, it rests on my history of over fifty years and that is that."<sup>129</sup> Yet, the affirmative existentialism professed is deceptive, and the *Vampire* trilogy testifies to the structural nature of the author's obsessions, doubts, and hurt.

### **The Victorian Empire: Vampire as V-Empire**

In Mudrooroo's *Vampire* trilogy, *Aboriginal Reality* is offset by a Gothic fin-de-siècle reading of Indigeneity, so that the quintet's movement through Indigenous empowerment is circular: "It begins

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<sup>127</sup> Clark, "Unmasking Mudrooroo," 50.

<sup>128</sup> Mudrooroo, "Portrait of the Artist," 17 of 23.

<sup>129</sup> Mudrooroo, "Tell them you're Indian," 264.

by *announcing* the end, and in this way returns us to the tone of *Doctor*<sup>130</sup> after the optimistic finale of *Master*. In *The Undying*, Jangamuttuk's mob sail off into the uncanny female universe of the sea, also associated with race through white invasion.<sup>131</sup> Hélène Cixous analyzes the uncanny as the liminal term in which the male and female principle fuse, a borderline area between life and death that inspires anxiety of dissolution as well as new beginnings. Thus, the Indigenes' journey toward the setting sun, a Western archetype of finality and death, also alerts the reader to an uncertain future through an unsettling merger of masculine and feminine songlines.

In this liminal area of the Indigenous Ghost Dreaming and Western master-narrative, the vampire, the most awe-inspiring exponent of Victorian Gothic fiction,<sup>132</sup> emerges as a discursive specter. Mudrooroo's harbinger of death, the undead vampiress Amelia, defies discrete race, gender, and class boundaries through her ambiguous inscription in all three terrains. Since the white female vampire pursues Indigenes and settlers alike, she subverts the colonial project; inscribing female sexuality in the colonial setting as both active/aggressive/threatening (her bloody fellatio scenes) and passive/acquiescent/comforting (her sexual submission to Wadawaka), she goes beyond the binary precepts of the Western master-narrative, so that the 'v/empire' is 'mistressed'. Mudrooroo's Vampire trilogy undoes the traditional binary constructions that *Master* and *Doctor* reverse in their search for Indigenous empowerment: rather than denoting an inversion<sup>133</sup> of roles, the vampire haunts and terrorizes identity to deconstruct it into nonrepresentation. It would be difficult to deny the author's personal stake in this Gothic development of the quintet. It is emblematic of

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<sup>130</sup> Turcotte, "Remastering the Ghosts," 145.

<sup>131</sup> Mudrooroo, *Doctor Wooreddy*, 1–4.

<sup>132</sup> See Christopher Craft, "'Kiss Me with those Red Lips': Gender and Inversion in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*," *Representations* 8 (Autumn 1984): 107–133.

<sup>133</sup> Inversion understood as a reversal of colonial roles, such as exemplified in *Doctor Wooreddy* and *Master of the Ghost Dreaming*. Inversion was also a term commonly used in fin-de-siècle society to describe homosexuality, which was understood as a female soul inhabiting a male body, and expressed a deeply rooted Victorian concern with the "potential fluidity of gender roles"—see Craft, "'Kiss Me with those Red Lips,'" 112–115.

Mudrooroo's uncanny status that his fiction should arouse strong notions of political incorrectness, but the apparently misogynist configuration of his Vampire trilogy can be given a more complex postcolonizing reading. Mudrooroo's undeniably disquieting literary testament takes identity fully out of the reductive terms of biological and cultural essentialism.

### **Vampirizing Land and Race**

Amelia is a contemporary reinscription of Count Dracula, who first came to life in Bram Stoker's famous instance of late-Victorian Gothic. Its first publication in 1897 coincided with the decline of Empire and the end of the Victorian era, and precedes Mudrooroo's first volume of his Vampire trilogy by exactly a century. The Gothic doom that pervades Mudrooroo's Vampire series is the product of another disappointing *fin de siècle* which saw the reductive onslaught of conservative politics on Indigenous affairs and concomitant personal attacks on Indigenous-identified public figures whose biological origins were considered unclear. At exactly a century's remove, Mudrooroo exploits the assimilative thrust in multiculturalism and social Darwinism for a postcolonial rewrite of the Count's story. Dracula is, after all, a character who exemplifies the overriding Victorian concern with pureness of blood and origins, and Amelia evokes a similar anxiety from an Indigenous Australian mirror perspective.

Stephen Arata describes Count Dracula's invasion of Britain as Gothic "reverse colonisation" in the historical context of Victorian and imperial decline. Significantly, Stoker, who was a writer of Irish extraction and so born in England's oldest colony, grounds the locus of vampiric horror in the wild, inaccessible Transylvania, Rumania, a country which embodied the meeting of East and West and represented the liminal locus of imperial strife as far back as the Romans.<sup>134</sup> Here, Western powers had long fought out their

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<sup>134</sup>David Malouf's *An Imaginary Life* (1978; Sydney: Picador, 1980). deals with the uncanny encounter between (Roman) civilization and the ethnic Other, taking



expansive impulses and Rumania was known, therefore, “as part of the vexed ‘Eastern question’.”<sup>135</sup> This troubling issue included the process of balkanization, which also spawned the vampire myth. From Serbia disturbing tales of vampires reached Western Europe in the early 1700s and aroused “widespread interest,” appealing intensely to the popular imagination.<sup>136</sup> Similarly, balkanization spilled across local borders after the assassination of the heir to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Franz Ferdinand, by a Serbian nationalist in Sarajevo, thus triggering the First World War. Therefore, the crisis of imperialism and modernism, territorial fragmentation and existential anxiety of the period were closely related; they spurred Freud’s interest in the uncanny and structurally link up with the vampire. The imperial/colonial aspect of the vampire is salient in its origins in territorial loss and fragmentation; the irrepressible anxiety this generates is underlined in the undead creature’s haunting powers and need to rest in “native earth.”<sup>137</sup>

Stoker’s *Dracula* echoes Western invasive behavior in the journey of the solicitor’s clerk Jonathan Harker into Transylvania, but this consummate orientalist is soon at a loss in his penetration of the unknown. He is the tale’s foil to Count Dracula, who is configured as his mirror image and a skilled ‘occidental’ who successfully invades and contaminates Britain, disturbingly evoking the distant brutality of colonial violence in the metropole. Indeed, *Dracula’s* Gothic fantasy of reverse colonization acts out geopolitical fears about the Other’s capacity to strike back as well as cultural guilt for the annihilation of other/foreign civilizations: “In Count Dracula, Victorian readers could recognize their culture’s imperial ideology mirrored back as a kind of monstrosity [...] as a form of bad faith.”<sup>138</sup>

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Ovid’s exile to Tomis, Rumania, then at the edge of Empire, and his friendship with a wild boy, a Noble Savage of sorts, as its point of departure.

<sup>135</sup> Stephen D. Arata, “The Occidental Tourist: Dracula and the Anxiety of Reverse Colonisation,” *Victorian Studies* 33.4 (Summer 1990): 627. Note how the Eastern question takes us back to Edward Said’s concept of Orientalism—see Chapter 1.

<sup>136</sup> See “vampire,” in *Britannica Concise Encyclopedia* (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2006; Answers.com, 2009), <http://www.answers.com/topic/vampire> (accessed 17 July 2009).

<sup>137</sup> See “vampire,” *Britannica Concise Encyclopedia*.

<sup>138</sup> Arata, “The Occidental Tourist,” 634.

In *Doctor and Master*, this bad faith allows Mudrooroo to script the act of imperial colonization itself as monstrous from the perspective of the Indigenes and to take this to unsuspected Gothic extremes in his Vampire series.

Ken Gelder notes that in Tasmania's first map (by Thomas Scott, 1830) the name 'Transylvania' had been used to describe an uncharted part of the island, and accordingly adopted implicitly as the geographical setting of Mudrooroo's quintet. As the name evidences,<sup>139</sup> this Antipodean no man's land denoted a forested, mountainous area, as indicated by the Count's Rumanian home territory. Due to its inaccessibility, wildness, and uncomfortable closeness to Empire, the Rumanian Transylvania became associated with the vampiric imaginary in the Victorian mind. Transylvania "nominate[d] a region which lies under the shadow of—but is still, for the moment, outside—colonisation."<sup>140</sup> Likewise, its Tasmanian equivalent lay beyond the infamous 'blackline' which marked the border between white 'civilization' and Indigenous 'savagery'.<sup>141</sup> Mudrooroo inverts the latter and inscribes the mob's journey to their 'promised land', the Australian mainland, in the troublesome home of a savage European 'v/empire':

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<sup>139</sup> *trans* (L) = 'across'; *silva* (L) = 'forest'.

<sup>140</sup> Kenneth Gelder, *Reading the Vampire* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994): 1.

<sup>141</sup> The 'blackline' was a failed initiative to establish an armed human chain which would sweep from one side of the island to the other, thus rounding up the Tasmanian Indigenes. It formed part of the so-called Black War, which probably had its origin around 1803 and reached a peak of violence in the early 1830s and denotes the repeated attempts by white colonizers to decimate the Indigenous presence on the island. It is nowadays commonly agreed that this unofficial war was an act of pure genocide by the settlers, which only ended when the few remaining 'authentic' Tasmanians had been deported to Flinders Island and placed in the care of George Augustus Robinson. Although the genocidal view has recently been contested by Australian historians such as Keith Windschuttle (*The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, vol. 1: *Van Diemen's Land 1803–1847* [Sydney: Macleay, 2002]), who maintains a benign settlement paradigm, the latter has in turn been criticised as inaccurate and untrue by other scholars—see, for instance, *Whitewash: On Keith Windschuttle's Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, ed. Robert Manne (Melbourne: Black Inc. Agenda, 2003), and *Telling the Truth about Aboriginal History*, ed. Bain Attwood (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin 2005).

for Stoker, the Gothic and the travel narrative problematize, separately and together, the very boundaries on which British imperial hegemony depended: between civilised and primitive, colonizer and colonized, victimizer (either imperialist or vampire) and victim.<sup>142</sup>

Likewise for Mudrooroo, the mob's Gothic songline into the colonial uncanny interrogates imperialist distinctions of race, class, and gender. In *Dracula's* boundary-crossing travel narrative, vampires "are generated by racial enervation and the decline of empire, not vice versa [so that] the appearance of vampires becomes the sign of profound trouble."<sup>143</sup> In Mudrooroo's Vampire series, therefore, Wadawaka and George are especially troubled, since their racial boundaries are tenuous.

George is Sir George Augustus Robinson's half-caste son by Ludjee, named after him but adopted by Jangamuttuk. His hybrid status, youthful inexperience, and lack of inscription in Indigenous manhood make him susceptible to the transformative potential of Amelia's infectious bite—as he says in *The Undying*, "Worse, far worse, at least for me, an old granny ghost touched me with her teeth and followed after us. She gave me dreams that were not my dreams. And that is part of my story."<sup>144</sup> Vampiric contamination is an extension of the social-Darwinist notion of stronger and weaker blood that translates the colonial condition of white domination into genetics. Thus,

if blood is a sign of racial identity, then Dracula effectively deracinates his victims [...] In turn, they receive a new racial identity, one that marks them as literally 'Other' [...] Miscegenation leads, not to the mixing of races, but to the biological and political annihilation of the weaker race by the stronger.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Arata, "The Occidental Tourist," 626.

<sup>143</sup> A "The Occidental Tourist," 629.

<sup>144</sup> Mudrooroo, *The Undying* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1998): 2.

<sup>145</sup> Arata, "The Occidental Tourist," 630.

On this view, George is lost for the Indigenous cause because Fada's white blood will take over, which itself stands for colonization as an infectious disease,<sup>146</sup> because the racist notion of weak blood dictated that the Aborigines were condemned to extinction under pressure from white civilization. Nature's immutable law of the 'survival of the fittest', adapted to eugenicist purposes, would justify the doomed-race scenario and absorptionist policy, which, from an Indigenous point of view, effectively 'othered' the Stolen Generations into specimens of white society. The vampiress's perspective 'infects' the trilogy's focalization time and again. George's story starts out as an autobiographical yarn at a campfire,<sup>147</sup> but as the vampiric infection progresses, Amelia invades his mind and takes over his narrative. Thus, Maureen Clark observes that "as the trilogy's other first-person narrator, Amelia 'punctures' George's account at regular intervals,"<sup>148</sup> and this effectively deflates/deconstructs the possibilities of the popular genre of life writing as a means to recover an 'authentic' sense of Indigeneity. As "the undying"<sup>149</sup> who "exists in the liminal space of the un-dead," George's inscription in the genre of *life writing* is ambiguous, if not out of place,<sup>150</sup> and suggests Mudrooroo's own vexed location within/without Indigeneity.

Throughout the trilogy, George mostly appears as his totemic Dreaming animal, a dingo become Amelia's "faithful [...] doggy."<sup>151</sup> As colonial control is also configured through gender, the vampiress uses him as a toy in her sexual exploits: engaged in cunnilingus, he turns into her "lapdog"<sup>152</sup> and is metonymic of Amelia's genital area. The image harks back to the "animal companion with open jaws and snapping teeth" of classical art, which sometimes accompanied a beautiful woman and "represented her deadly genital trap and evil

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<sup>146</sup> Wendy Pearson, "I, the Undying," in *Mongrel Signatures: Reflections on the Work of Mudrooroo*, ed. Annalisa Oboe (Cross/Cultures 64; Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2003): 190. This was also literally true: Indigenes fell prey to imported, European illnesses which often decimated their populations.

<sup>147</sup> Mudrooroo, *The Undying*, 1.

<sup>148</sup> Clark, "Terror as White Female," 129.

<sup>149</sup> Mudrooroo, *The Undying*, 1.

<sup>150</sup> Pearson, "I, the Undying," 190.

<sup>151</sup> Mudrooroo, *Underground* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1999): 103.

<sup>152</sup> Mudrooroo, *The Promised Land* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 2000): 32.

intent”<sup>153</sup> but also aligns with the vampiress’s mouth. George becomes the obedient pet ‘Dingo’ to Wadawaka and Amelia’s sinister family unit in a womb-like cavern, an Australian realm of the dead that, with its fierce Cerberus, underground river, and ferryman, repeats the underworld of classical Greek mythology.

This underground family is yet another instance of Mudrooroo’s ever-shifting, promiscuous use of characters, plot, and genre (he himself speaks of postmodern “pastiche”<sup>154</sup>), in which the Greek myth of the spring goddess Persephone, a fertility symbol, is reconfigured into a warped story of female empowerment and comment on the state of Indigeneity. Persephone was also known as the earth goddess Kore—the very name of the vessel that carried Amelia to Australia with the native earth she needs to rest in—and was abducted by Hades, the king of the underworld, to become his bride. The latter hints at another Lord of Darkness, Count Dracula, who in Mudrooroo’s fiction weds Amelia by vampirizing her. It also connects to Wadawaka, whose darkness is part and parcel of Amelia’s unnatural habitat and evokes a disturbing, zombie-like sense of racial hybridization in which the resultant body is dead-alive, a living corpse of sorts:

Again I was with my friend, Wadawaka, and my mistress, in a vast cavern lit with glowing pools of liquid which reflected off myriad specks of mitre in the walls and ceiling to make it a magical place, warm and secure, but all was not well in that refuge. Something was wrong with him. His face was both blank and strained and stress lines mottled his eye sockets and wrinkled his brow. As for my mistress, she seemed more at ease. Her face was calm, free of lines, but like that of a doll fixed in one expression [...] Here I am and so are you, my love, for I have chosen you as my new dark lord, and all that I ask is that you accept me as I love you—you, a thing of darkness as I am. But what is wrong with you? You do not speak and your

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<sup>153</sup> Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London & New York: Routledge, 1993): 108.

<sup>154</sup> Mudrooroo, “Portrait of the Artist,” 2 of 23.

face is twisted as if you hate me. How can we be enemies, when we are similar?<sup>155</sup>

Amelia controls Wadawaka with her sexuality, enhanced by “numbing”<sup>156</sup> hallucinogenic mushrooms, so as to replace her previous “dark lord”, Dracula, and makes him the adoptive father to two Indigenous babies. Belying the reproductive potential Persephone represents, these “two tiny *tykes*”<sup>157</sup> have been abducted to complete Amelia’s nuclear family and feed on her blood. This introduces a parasitical form of regeneration, as they transform into vampires themselves. Mudrooroo emulates and rewrites the role of the upper gods Zeus and Demeter in the retrieval of their daughter from the underworld by scripting a maban intervention of the clan leaders Jangamuttuk and Ludjee in Amelia’s dark affairs. Because their shamanic powers and firm Indigenous identity make them more resistant to Amelia’s wiles, their adoptive sons Wadawaka and George are returned to the realm of the living. Yet, a price is exacted for their Indigenous power play: Ludjee and Jangamuttuk disappear from the narrative, only to reappear for display at the London World Fair of 1851, and Amelia, Medea-like, boils her vampiric pseudo-offspring to death in retaliation for Wadawaka’s elopement. In a last promiscuous twist, Mudrooroo produces Amelia as an anagram of the mythological earth goddesses Lamiae, who killed and sucked the blood of children and young men and lived in caves;<sup>158</sup> he also draws on the Greek myth of Lamia, a dark queen of the Classical Libya, which was a racially indeterminate area at the northern limits of the “Dark Continent.”<sup>159</sup> Lamia’s two children were taken away after an

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<sup>155</sup> Mudrooroo, *Underground*, 80.

<sup>156</sup> Note that the quintet uses the Indigenous term *num* to describe the ghostly colonizers, reminiscent of the English word for passivity and insensitivity, *numb*.

<sup>157</sup> Mudrooroo, *Underground*, 104.

<sup>158</sup> Clark, “Terror as White Female,” 124.

<sup>159</sup> The Dark Continent was a term used in the nineteenth century to denote Sub-Saharan Africa, whose interior was basically unknown and left dark by mapmakers. In Freudian terms, it refers to male perception of female sexuality. Julia Kristeva notes that “In *The Question of Lay Analysis* [...] Freud wrote: ‘We know less about the sexual life of little girls than of boys. But we need not feel ashamed of this distinction; after all, the sexual life of adult women is a “dark continent” for psychology’” (212). She explains that Freud borrowed the term

extramarital affair with Zeus, and in maddening grief she became the child-killing monster that Amelia reenacts. Thus, in a masterful stroke, Mudrooroo denounces the unnatural perfidiousness of the Stolen Generations policy, which—metaphorically speaking—sucked away the lifeblood from Indigenous Australia and constituted yet another step in the genocidal social-Darwinist policy that defined Indigeneity in terms of biological authenticity.<sup>160</sup>

### Vampirizing Gender and Class

Wadawaka is immune to Amelia's bite because his "blood is as sea water to a thirsty man,"<sup>161</sup> a quality shared with Ludjee, whose "blood is too strong for [Amelia]."<sup>162</sup> The vampiress is intimately connected to the earth and cannot overcome the freedom the sea represents for both. The power Amelia wields over him is inscribed in the strong sexual undercurrents in vampire fiction, epitomized in Stoker's tale. Stephen Arata holds that Stoker's fiction is concerned with imperial anxieties in which heroines represent the dangers that threaten modern life,<sup>163</sup> and Mudrooroo cleverly returns this fear postcolonially in the shape of a monstrous white female protagonist who threatens the community tissue of 'primitive' Australians. In Stoker's original, once Lady Lucy is infected and transformed by the Count, she takes a "phallic correction"<sup>164</sup> by receiving a stake through

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from the colonial exploits in Africa, and that "his metaphor for the female sex turns it into an unrepresentable enigma, expressing the castration anxiety of the man who approaches it." This neatly joins the racial to the sexual, and the colonial to gender. To tease out this comparison fully, one should also note that the African explorer John Rowlands Stanley coined the term in his description of a "dark forest—virgin, hostile, impenetrable," which harks back to Transylvania/Tasmania, the castrating vampiress's home. See "Dark Continent," in *International Dictionary of Psychoanalysis* (The Gale Group, 2005; Answers.com 2008), <http://www.answers.com/topic/dark-continent-psychoanalysis> (accessed 2 February 2008).

<sup>160</sup> See Introduction and Chapter 1.

<sup>161</sup> Mudrooroo, *The Promised Land*, 227.

<sup>162</sup> Mudrooroo, *The Undying* 121.

<sup>163</sup> Arata, "The Occidental Tourist," 625.

<sup>164</sup> Craft, "'Kiss Me with those Red Lips,'" 124.

the heart, which provokes her orgasmic death. In (little) death the male and female principle merge and thus dissolve the subject and deconstruct identity, but Mudrooroo bends this deconstructive argument across a racial axis as well. Amelia also receives a phallic correction, but of a different kind; in a violent rape at the hands of Wadawaka, Mudrooroo configures a scene of heavy pornographic thrust in which she loses her virginity, experiences proverbial little death, and claims her new dark/black 'master':

"Sir, sir," I pant along with him, which changes to "master, master," as I feel myself being overcome by an emotion I have not felt since my other dark lord took me for his then dismissed me out into my world of darkness and loneliness [...] I know he is about to spend himself, but I have never thought that I too might reply as I am now doing. I shriek as if I am about to cease [...] "Master," I exclaim half in earnest, "you have conquered me and in the conquering have made me yours." "No," he replies, "I am no master nor will I have a master over me."<sup>165</sup>

This last comment causes Amelia to identify Wadawaka as John Summers, the first free black Englishman, whom her father counseled in the defense of his case; Summers had rebelled against the British philanthropists who had fraudulently pocketed money destined for the Sierra Leone colony,<sup>166</sup> for which he was convicted and sent off to Australia, thus inscribing another possible black forefather for the author in the narrative.<sup>167</sup>

Wadawaka's pledge to freedom prefigures the disastrous denouement of their underground family, later reborn in a scene of

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<sup>165</sup> Mudrooroo, *The Undying*, 187–189.

<sup>166</sup> At the end of the eighteenth century, there was a substantial black community of freed slaves in London, whose lack of means of support and involvement in petty crime raised concern among the authorities. A plan was conceived to relocate these people to the first free black colony in Sierra Leone on the African west coast. The colony also housed a convict population and functioned parallel to the Australian penal colony to empty English prisons (Pybus, "From 'Black' Caesar to Mudrooroo," 26–28)

<sup>167</sup> Mudrooroo, *The Undying*, 190.



subdued romanticism at the end of *The Promised Land* which is juxtaposed to the extramarital, 'illegitimate' sex under way between Sir George and the governor's wife, Rebecca. The latter are, indeed, "two rogues that deserve each other," finding each other in their scheming for maximum colonial gain from the imminent gold rush.<sup>168</sup> Their coupling is painted against the backdrop of "the modern world symbolised by the monstrous ship in the harbour," possibly Port Albert in Victoria, where the gold rush started in 1851 (200, 222). The phallic "long bulk of the *Great Britain* [...] her monstrous length" has penetrated the Australian mainland "as great and as oppressive as the empire that built it" (219). Thus, the colonial project is explicitly configured as sexual exploit(ation):

"Great, great," [Sir George] groaned, his eyes clinging to the long length of the ship: He imagined the bows slicing through the waters and plunging deep within the waves. "All iron, all hard as iron and over three hundred and fifty feet in length," he moaned, plunging hard into her. "Deeper, deeper," Becky moaned in unison, bent over, and staring at the ship. (229)

Their fetishistic fascination with (the) 'Great Britain' reveals their real obsession: the confirmation of their improved social status at the heart of the Empire. The vessel is their means of visiting the London World Fair of 1851,<sup>169</sup> where they plan to display themselves, the handful of remaining Tasmanians, and an enormous gold slab. This is meant to secure funding and protection for the exploitation of the rich gold find at a future mission compound under his and Rebecca's joint care.

The luring gold nugget, a metaphor for the mercantilist greed underlying the colonial project and the middle-class obsession with social status, has been baptized the Golden Fleece due to its uncommon likeness to a sheepskin. This classical reference inscribes the gold find in the issue of paternal legitimacy, as Jason and the Argonauts embarked on a quest for the Golden Fleece to place him as

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<sup>168</sup> Mudrooroo, *The Promised Land*, 225. Further page references are in the main text.

<sup>169</sup> The London World Fair aimed at displaying Britain's superiority in technology and became an emblem of the Victorian Age.

the rightful king on the throne of Iolcus in Thessaly, which was in dispute due to the plotting of one of the former king's wives. The claimants of the gold treasure, however, are two fraudulent parvenus who need the colonial enterprise to overcome class difference and enthrone themselves in the seat of Empire:

Sir George Augustus was one of those self-made knights who, with the Reform Act of 1832, had risen from the enfranchised lower classes. Though he had yet to create a suitably noble genealogy to go with his advancement.

Rebecca Crawley, by contrast, "using brazen invention together with her beauty and sharp intelligence, had glossed over her own origins, which were lower than [sic] those of the knight."<sup>170</sup> Obviously not the rightful owners of the gold, these tricksters have dispossessed the Indigenous of their natural resources. Sir George therefore concocts a story to justify and file his exploitation claim after his police force has carried out the necessary local ethnic cleansing:

There has already been a battle between two savage tribes, one of which held native title to the land, and they have been so decimated that the area is as bare of inhabitants as it is of vegetation. It is truly a *terra nullius* and is under my control" (197)

This is an argument whose falsity holds deep (post)colonial resonances of illegitimacy.

Thus, Sir George and Rebecca jointly embark upon the project of furthering their advancement by returning to the metropole and displaying their newfound wealth to the nation. Strategically located as a postscript closing the fictional triptych, an extract from Her Majesty's Diary reveals that the Queen is greatly pleased by the enormous gold slab, "which bodes well for the future of the colony" (233). This interest raises doubts about the Queen's colonial authority, as the Golden Fleece is stolen property and the issue of paternal legitimacy embedded in the myth automatically

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<sup>170</sup> *The Promised Land*, 10–11. Further page references are in the main text.

disenfranchises a lady's rule. Furthermore, it conjures up a disturbing connection with Amelia, whom the Queen describes as a "strong wom[a]n of the empire" (232). By placing these musings at the end of *The Promised Land*, Mudrooroo suggests that, as Head of the British Empire, Queen Victoria incarnates the Supreme V/Empire or dominant Dark Lady who sucks the colonies dry of their wealth and propagates white civilization through Victorious Empire. Thus, this textual maneuver, which harks back to Harker's celebratory afterword in Stoker's *Dracula*, suggests Amelia's final victory/Victoria over Australia.

The comparison has further disturbing connections in the present, since Mudrooroo also scripts Amelia as Eliza Fraser's sister, "a controversial figure in Australia's mythologies of nationhood."<sup>171</sup> Kay Schaffer's in-depth study observes that, believed to be "the first white female shipwreck victim facing 'the natives' in a remote and uncharted area of Australia,"<sup>172</sup> Eliza was allegedly sexually abused by them. However, her biography is fraught with ambiguities, and, according to Maureen Clark, "conflicting and contradictory. Some lean toward representing the Aboriginal people as her rapists and enslavers. Others see her in a much different light as a temptress and wanton colonial woman."<sup>173</sup> Mudrooroo scripts Amelia into this ambiguous account as Eliza's empowered alter ego: "Before I was as other girls. Now I am perhaps far worse than females such as my sister Eliza."<sup>174</sup> As naming and renaming play such an important role in Mudrooroo's life and fiction, the link between Eliza and another, contemporary Elizabeth should not be missed; Gerry Turcotte's analysis of Eliza Fraser as "go[ing] from mother of empire to symbol of female moral degradation"<sup>175</sup> can be equally applied to the present Queen of Britain and Australia. If Elizabeth II can be read as the supreme female sign of neocolonial depravity, the V/Empire is indeed no Master but a Mistress who obviously bodes *no* well for the postcolony's future. This, in turn, is symptomatic of Mudrooroo's

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<sup>171</sup> Clark, "Terror as White Female," 127.

<sup>172</sup> Kay Schaffer, *In the Wake of First Contact: The Eliza Fraser Stories* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995): xiii.

<sup>173</sup> Clark, "Terror as White Female," 127.

<sup>174</sup> Mudrooroo, *The Undying*, 66.

<sup>175</sup> Turcotte, "Remastering the Ghosts," 143.

treatment of the mother figure in general, and it should come as no surprise that the author's mother's name was Elizabeth Barron, which adds further fuel to the suspicion that the misogyny detected in his fiction has a very personal edge to it.<sup>176</sup>

Mudrooroo's configuration of Amelia also responds to the sexual ambiguities projected through the count in Stoker's original, which thrive on trespassing the limits of Victorian gender discourse. In an analysis of the homoeroticism subjacent in *Dracula*, Christopher Craft shows how the Victorian obsession with gender blurring is configured as a monstrous threat to the heterosexual norm. Craft draws on nineteenth-century theories of sexual inversion, which describe the homosexual as a male body with a female soul/desire, to analyze the specific cast of the vampire threat and of woman as the mediator in male same-sex desire:

This insistent ideology of heterosexual mediation and its corollary anxiety about independent female sexuality return us to *Dracula* [...] where a mobile and hungering woman is represented as a monstrous usurper of masculine function, and where [...] all erotic contacts between males, whether directly libidinal or thoroughly sublimated, are fulfilled through a mediating female [...] Sexual inversion and Stoker's account of vampirism [...] are symmetrical metaphors sharing a fundamental ambivalence.<sup>177</sup>

The "Vampire Mouth, the central and recurring image of the novel," is foremost in this monstrous configuration of ambiguous sexuality, as it is male/female and active/passive:

As the primary site of erotic experience in *Dracula*, this mouth equivocates, giving the lie to the easy separation of the masculine and feminine. Luring at first with an inviting orifice, a promise of red softness, but delivering instead a piercing

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<sup>176</sup> See Maureen Clark's articles, PhD/book, and biography of Mudrooroo.

<sup>177</sup> Craft, "Kiss Me with those Red Lips," 115.

bone, the vampire mouth fuses and confuses [...] the gender-based categories of the penetrating and the receptive.<sup>178</sup>

This account invokes “the mythical *vagina dentata* which threatens to devour, to castrate via incorporation,”<sup>179</sup> a fundamental confusion of sexuality which parallels Count Dracula’s “systematic creation of *female* surrogates who enact his will and desire”<sup>180</sup> to propagate the vampiric infection.

In configuring Amelia as Dracula’s offspring, Mudrooroo follows the misogynistic subtexts laid down in Stoker’s monstrous inscription of sexual ambivalence but reworks its class setting. The sexually omnivorous vampiress is empowered as the fundamental player on the colonial scene and as a “gross, female stereotype reproduces in all manner of ways how men have authored the role of white women in the colonies and how well they have responded to the desires and ideals of the dominant group.”<sup>181</sup> Early Australian settlement mainly consisted of impoverished metropolitan rejects in search of colonial redemption and gain, and thus Amelia’s profile also encodes a crushing connection between class and women’s oppression:

In London we were poor, not as poor as poor, but my father was a wretched law clerk, who mulled over depositions for a pitiful wage in the Law Serjeant’s Inn. His subservience stopped at day’s end when he came home to tyrannise us, his two daughters and our mother, a colourless woman who had had all the spunk driven out of her long ago by his cruelty, though I never saw him use his fists on her. He believed that he was a gentleman fallen on hard times and this prevented him, I suppose.<sup>182</sup>

Male domestic violence unpacks her depraved behavior as a form of gendered retaliation, but her origins also explain why this is never

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<sup>178</sup> “Kiss Me with those Red Lips,” 109.

<sup>179</sup> Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine*, 157.

<sup>180</sup> Craft, “Kiss Me with those Red Lips,” 109 (emphasis added).

<sup>181</sup> Clark, “Terror as White Female,” 125.

<sup>182</sup> Mudrooroo, *The Undying*, 68.

covered up with the soothing cloak of the count's aristocratic decorum, whose depravations remain elegantly implicit and undercoded in Stoker's Victorian original.<sup>183</sup>

Whereas in *Dracula* Gothic fear and revulsion are grounded in not naming the sexual act, the Vampire trilogy articulates them through sexual explicitness verging on pornography; this is "in ways which both mock and ironize the very issues of unrepresentability that have made *Dracula* so resonant for Western culture and so productive of interpretation(s)."<sup>184</sup> Amelia's sexuality is depraved because of its explicit, fundamental ambivalence: she makes neither distinctions nor exceptions in her sexual depredations and con/fuses little death with death itself, aligning the consumption of blood and semen as "white blood,"<sup>185</sup> exemplified in the gory fellatio scene where she subdues Captain Torrens, a cruel soldier with the capacity to change into a werebear:

I tighten my grip on his paws and fully engulf him and bite down. He gives a great bellow of pain as my teeth meet together. Desperately he seeks to free himself from my grip only to find my strength is the equal of his. I manage to hold him as I lap the life blood spurting from him. His body shifts and strains. The change comes over him but too late. I feel his body thickening and swelling towards the heavy furry shape of a bear. I let none of this distract me. His blood is an elixir filled with power. I gulp down the rich bear essence while I exult in his attempts to get free of me. I suck away his strength and it is the most wonderful experience I have yet had. I keep at him until the last drop is within me and I am bloated and replete. Sated, I let the werebear loose. His empty remains fall at my feet. (148-149)

Continuing this savage attack as a masquerade of female compassion and solidarity, the vampiress relentlessly turns on Torrens' long-abused wife:

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<sup>183</sup> Pearson, "I, the Undying," 195.

<sup>184</sup> "I, the Undying," 195.

<sup>185</sup> Mudrooroo, *The Undying*, 68, 148. Further page references are in the main text.

“There [...] the brute is dead and he was delicious [...] Let me kiss you, for I have relieved you of your torment,” I say, taking her face in my hands and placing my bloody lips full on hers. “There, taste your husband for the last time,” and I break her neck as if it were snapping a twig. “There,” I say, “I have relieved you of your other torment that was your life.” (149)

A merciless boundary crosser to suit her predatory needs, Amelia not only subverts stereotypes by cannibalizing civilized behavior and bodies but also preys on the Indigenous, whose tasty eucalyptus tang she prefers. Many of these she ‘sucks dry’ and others she converts, such as George and Gunatinga or Dungeater.

The latter’s submission to Amelia translates into a merger of the masculine and feminine, mapping racial identity across gender. This cripple would-be shaman “is somewhat different from other men, that is those of England. There is a long slit where there should be none. As I run my tongue along it, it reminds me of my own, though he is male enough.” The sexual ambiguity denoted in the ritual scarring blends into a scene of vampiric invasion: through an orgasmic exchange of blood—in which Amelia slits her own arm to emulate the vagina and penis simultaneously—he becomes her servant and is renamed Renfiel, echoing Count Dracula’s untrustworthy servant, Renfield (93). Gunatinga puts into profile the performative identity of many of the trilogy’s characters: he appears not only as Renfiel but also as Galbol Wednga or Singer of Whales, Moma Kopa or Spirit Master, and lastly as the nameless, hideous ferryman in Amelia’s underworld. His constant search for status among his mob makes him vulnerable to Amelia’s intentions, and suggests a kind of Indigenous parvenu, on a par with Sir George and Lady Rebecca—and perhaps the author himself?

The fundamental ambivalence of Amelia’s omnivorous polyvalent sexuality is fully driven home in her relationship with Lady Lucy, Sir George’s upper-middle-class wife:

To emphasize her complete subjection, Mrs Fraser tied the girl’s hands and feet to the bedposts with scarves [...] [Lucy] moaned as the woman’s lips and then other lips touched her skin. She had forgotten about the dingo. The imprisoned girl

writhed, but not to be free. At the extent of her vision, at her loins, was the thin tawny animal lapping away with a long tong that, sweeping in and out of her, made her body squirm. The sensations were of such strength that she did not first cognise the lips at her throat turning into hard teeth, two of which were as sharp as needles. This she knew suddenly, as they bit down. She felt the blood spurting from her into a mouth clamped about her wound just as her body *spasmed* and *spasmed*. She gave a *piercing* scream and then went *limp*, content only to be fed on.<sup>186</sup>

The latter scene (con)fuses penetration, reception, orgasm, and ejaculation completely. Amelia's fangs usurp the penile function in piercing Lucy's neck, responded to by an ejaculatory spurt of blood into Amelia's vaginal mouth from Lucy's body, which is signified as the penis itself. The vampire kiss makes it impossible to separate male from female, which in disturbing ways circulate through each other and—to follow Hélène Cixous' account—come together as liberating (little) death:

[Amelia] lowered her lips to [Lucy's] neck and seemed to bestow a long lasting kiss on her throat. This revived the girl passionately. She writhed and a scream began to emerge from her throat. This was quickly stopped by the woman who transferred her lips from throat to mouth and sucked in the agitation of the girl so that she grew as still as death. (213)

### Vampiric Hybridization

For all the ominous undertones in Amelia's depredations, on the final pages of *The Promised Land* an image of tenuous hope is born(e) from the dark underworld that shelters Wadawaka and Amelia. It announces some kind of hybridization that arguably dissolves the stifling oppositions of life and death, male and female, black and

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<sup>186</sup> Mudrooroo, *The Promised Land*, 8 (emphasis added). Further page references are in the main text.



white, and upper and lower class. Their leveling (re)union suggests a way forward for Australia:

“No thoughts of what is past and what you have suffered. We are above them and their attempts to hurt. In your darkness I find myself and, and—” “In your whiteness, I tremble, knowing you for what you are,” he replied. “Do so, for I have not forgiven you,” Amelia rejoined tartly. “Now, the night is passing and the land flows over us in all its glory. Let us return to my chamber so that I might make you tremble in another and more satisfying way.” (227–228)

Prior to this scene of uneasy ‘romantic’ thrust, Wadawaka’s unfixed identity has floated “from black slave to black gentleman to black savage to whaler to highwayman and then back to John Summers” (184), rehearsing a wide range of social roles that prepare him for his renewed liaison with the vampiress.

In a promiscuous literary cross-over to Herman Melville, at the end of *Underground* Wadawaka shares Captain Ahab’s quest for Moby-Dick, the immensely phallic albino sperm whale now rewritten as an ambiguously-gendered symbol of colonization: “I dubbed her *The Empire*” (172–173). Wadawaka’s chase exemplifies a solidary concept of black resistance reminiscent of *Master’s* pan-Indigeneity, as his hunting “fellows” are a Native-American Indian, an African, and a Polynesian respectively. Thus, the text posits that biological delimitations of blackness and Indigeneity should be forsaken and exchanged for cultural inscriptions based on a universal, shared experience of oppression. Wadawaka’s quest concludes with the imperial whale’s death toward the end of the trilogy, which readies him to confront the V/Empire, “good and mad and just as bad a white beast” (171).

Amelia claims that a ‘native’ connection to Antipodean soil, figured as female, has transformed and hybridized her as much as her dark lord, Wadawaka: “Within [the earth], I gained the power to face the burning blast of the day and freedom from the tyranny of the sun. I was reborn in her depths” (226). In Wadawaka’s and Amelia’s rebirth from the dark depths of the earth, the land becomes the unifying element, as “it flows over us in all its glory” and awaits their love match; “clinging together so that they had to manoeuvre their united

bulk through the narrow doorway," they leave George, the last survivor of the Tasmanian mob, to stand guard outside as Dingo (228). Amelia and Wadawaka's as yet shapeless, "united bulk" enters the narrow matrix of Australia and is about to rewrite the invasive phallic "long bulk of the *Great Britain*" moored in the harbor (219).

How can one read this finale in terms of contemporary Indigenous identity configuration and empowerment? Little indicates that Amelia and Wadawaka's re/union can be capitalized to signify Reconciliation; Wadawaka's status as an Indigenous Australian is as uncertain as Mudrooroo's is contested and denied, and George's future prospects as sole survivor with Indigenous blood are befuddled in his relegation to Amelia's lapdog,<sup>187</sup> echoing the status of the Stolen Generations. In the face of the genocidal onslaught of white civilization over the last two centuries, the blood question in Indigeneity is vexed, as many Aborigines nowadays can make only tenuous claims to genetic ancestry and have to formulate their Indigenous identity mainly through newly acquired cultural experience. Like Wadawaka and George, both Sally Morgan and Mudrooroo inscribe themselves in these problematics. An additional complication is Amelia's signification in the symbolic. Much more than a straightforward Gothic metaphor for (the pernicious impact of) Western civilization, Amelia's fundamental race, gender, and class ambivalence constitutes her as a highly complex character which reads into the issue of neo/colonial dis/possession in troubling ways; it borders on political incorrectness and harks back to the unsteady, contested status of the author in Australia. Amelia reconciles with Wadawaka but also usurps him, so how can her predatory character obsessed with (little) death point forward to a new postcolonial beginning for Australia? Likewise, Maureen Clark observes:

Mudrooroo firmly locates the cruelty and duplicity of colonialism in the patriarchal concept of the fatal woman—in the feminine, not in the masculine [...] Amelia's lack of restraint [in violence, lust etc.] appears to allude to the irrational actions of the colonial system she represents, and

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<sup>187</sup> Turcotte, "Vampiric Decolonization," 115.

perhaps the impossibility of 'rationalising' violence and death is the author's point.<sup>188</sup>

Is there anything positive to be gleaned from her presence?

Through his academic career, Mudrooroo was familiar with Derrida's deconstruction of ontological discourse in *Specters of Marx*, as we saw in chapter 1 a form of ideology criticism that blurs/questions material reality through the spectral incarnation of politico-identitarian engagement suppressed by the dominant discourse.<sup>189</sup> Derrida's haunting specter takes on the vexed, Gothic shape of the vampire in Mudrooroo's latest fiction, through which he may be understood as combining Derrida's postmodern ideology critique with the theorizing of postcolonizing violence by the French-Caribbean psychoanalyst Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth*.<sup>190</sup> Samira Kawash develops a pertinent, literary way of analyzing Fanon's ideas on postcolonial violence and identity deconstruction, which gell with Derrida's spectral revenant by means of the metaphor of vampiric terror(ism).

Kawash's point of departure is Fanon's notion that the violence of decolonization, as exemplified by contemporary political terrorism, is always in excess of its means, because it is in part instrumental (a dialectical means to an end) and in part absolute (beyond means and ends). In ways that coincide with Derrida's deconstruction of Marxist dialectics, Fanon postulates that this excess will give way to a new world in a non-dialectical way, signaling a rupture with, rather than a

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<sup>188</sup> Clark, "Mudrooroo: a likely story," 277.

<sup>189</sup> Only two years after publishing his Vampire trilogy, Mudrooroo refers to Derrida's *Specters of Marx* to back up his theorization of a spectral homeland—see Mudrooroo, "The Spectral Homeland," *Southerly* 62.1 (2002): 25–36, <http://search.informit.com.au.ezproxy.scu.edu.au/documentSummary;dn=601672570322422;res=IELLCC> (accessed 04 June 2013).

<sup>190</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, tr. Charles Lam Markmann (*Peau noire, masques blancs*, 1956, tr. 1967; London: Pluto, 1993) and Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, tr. Constance Farrington (*Les Damnés de la terre*, 1961, tr. 1963; London: Penguin, 2001). Gerry Turcotte points out the Fanon connection in Turcotte, "Vampiric Decolonization."

reformation of, the past.<sup>191</sup> According to Kawash, the vampire fits admirably into such a rupture with the old through the figure of terror/ism, which is “a spectre that haunts social order and public safety”:

‘spectral violence’ [...] is never fully materialized [...] always in excess of its apparent material effects and [...] neither containable, specifiable, nor localizable [...] As a ubiquitous form of spectral violence, the threat of terrorism is simultaneously omnipresent and yet never quite materializes. The terrorist is, in this sense, structurally similar to the ghosts and vampires of the Victorian imagination, exemplary figures of the Freudian uncanny.<sup>192</sup>

Fanon’s absolute violence of decolonization is “outside representation” and therefore located in a “zone of non-being” (244). This non-symbolized part of reality returns as what Slavoj Žižek calls spectral apparitions<sup>193</sup> that mark the uncanny limits of the symbolic order. Similarly, Kawash “consider[s] the zone of non-being as the space of a real that cannot appear in representation but that can only be marked by the persistence of a spectral haunting that is neither present nor absent.” In Fanon’s writings this takes the shape of a vampire dreamed up by one of his male colonial patients:

The terror of the vampire marks the violence of ‘deposing,’ a violence that cannot be represented within the normal modes of representation but which nonetheless signals a dangerous gap in reality, that is to say, a gap dangerous to the continuing existence of colonial reality. (245)

The vampire therefore *literalizes* the contradiction of the colonized’s existence as nonexistent, imposed by the colonial relationship (246).

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<sup>191</sup> Samira Kawash, “Terrorists and Vampires. Fanon’s Spectral Violence of Decolonization,” in *Frantz Fanon: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Anthony C. Alessandrini (London & New York: Routledge, 1999): 237.

<sup>192</sup> Kawash, “Terrorists and Vampires,” 238. Further page references are in the main text.

<sup>193</sup> See Chapter 1.

In the patient's nightmares, the vampire becomes a woman, whom he initially takes for his own mother, violently killed by a French soldier, but who is later revealed to be a female settler killed by that very patient in retaliatory compensation. This leads to a circulation of blood as the currency exacted in the colonial-racial economy: "This promiscuous flow of blood stages a collapse of proper corporeal boundaries, threatening the solidity of the body that will not stay in place" (249).

Whereas Fanon does not elaborate on the intersection of gender and race in this exchange, Kawash highlights their interconnection. The colonial circulation of blood implies racial contamination and interpenetration; the sexualizing of the extraction of colonial value as native virility is drained by the colonizer as the castrating woman; and the fluidity of the subject with bodies becoming non-beings is suspended between life and death. The vampire's all-invading deconstructive potential brings Kawash to the argument that "it would be a mistake to conclude that the vampire simply stands as a metaphor for the colonizer." Rather,

the threat of the vampire is equivocal, identified more properly with the entire scene of colonial non-existence. The vampire is simultaneously the force that threatens to drain the life from the colonized, and the condition of the colonized as the living dead. Thus, the vampire is both in-between and outside the Manichean opposition of native and settler. Where the colonial system claims to be 'all,' the persistence of the vampire exposes this 'all' to something else, a being neither living (as the colonizer) nor dead (as the landscape or the colonized bodies filling that landscape). The vampire marks the 'not-all' of colonial reality. (249)

This "not-all" or gap in the real is the locus of "radical alterity" where the vampire-cum-terrorist resides, a porous Lacanian *extimité* which

emphasizes the workings of the uncanny as a disturbance to the bordering functions that separate inside and outside [...] terrorism in its uncanny, excessive incarnation exposes security to its constitutive failure, for the outside that

terrorizes is always already at the heart of the inside that demands to be secured. (239)

Thus, the vampiric “not-all” is both the target of the symbolic order’s attempts at suppression and the source of a new, postcolonial beginning:

it is the violence of decolonization that wrests open a space from which will emerge the ‘new human’ to supplant the exclusions of European humanism. But Fanon’s gesture toward the ‘new human’ that emerges out of the space of decolonization is neither a correction of a bad old humanism nor a prescription for a new and better humanism. Rather, this ‘new human’ is something that cannot be known or predicted, that cannot be foretold or produced, but that simply comes. (255–256).

Mudrooroo’s promiscuous vampiress is inserted at the absolute/ly violent center of postcolonial deconstruction, and as the all-devouring monstrous female she participates in contaminating, sexualizing, emasculating, dissolving, and suspending the racial economy. She actively engages in the colonial search for mercantile gain through her sexual-cannibalistic pursuit and renders identity fluid by crossing established cultural and genetic borders, creating empty corpses and undead non-beings in her wake.

Amelia, then, is the omnipresent but elusive postcolonizing terrorist whose inescapable non-presence across race, gender, and class divisions heralds the coming forth of a new identity, reminiscent of all but without a definite shape, and therefore terrifyingly and monstrously uncanny. This leads Gerry Turcotte to the claim that Mudrooroo, rather than returning to the nihilistic discourse of *Doctor Wooreddy’s Prescription*, promiscuously lays bare a series of European M/master-narratives to expose their hidden agendas: once again, the author is elusive, playing on

the codes of representation which so frequently frame female sexuality as predatory, available and compromised. Similarly,

the fetishized black male body is brought to life in this tale, with every cliché and stereotype imaginable.<sup>194</sup>

This blurs rather than fixes corporeal and socio-cultural borders.

Wendy Pearson reaches similar conclusions by analyzing Amelia through Homi Bhabha's ideas on colonial mimicry and Judith Butler's conceptualization of gender performance. Amelia is an instance of repetitive behavior that necessarily deviates from the original to be copied.<sup>195</sup> This performative 'imperfection' allows Pearson to disentangle the race and gender issues underlying Mudrooroo's troubling inscription of the colonial vampiress. She argues:

In Amelia Fraser [...] [readers] encounter a dramatic historical re-vision of the story of Eliza Fraser [...] this particular figure of the European woman becomes not the victim of Aboriginal atrocity but the perpetrator of closely detailed acts of degradation and savagery.<sup>196</sup>

According to Pearson, Amelia's sexual-racial deprivations are so overcoded in the Vampire trilogy that they question the race, gender, and class discourses intimated in Stoker's original.<sup>197</sup> Pearson locates the Count's "deconstructive potential" as gender indefiniteness (186–187),<sup>198</sup> whose

horror of indeterminacy [...] destabilizes all of our fundamental cultural dichotomies: if the basic distinction between life and death is not operative, then neither are the binarisms of white and black, master and servant, civilized and savage, male and female, heterosexual and homosexual, present and past, history and fiction. (187)

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<sup>194</sup> Turcotte, "Remastering the Ghosts," 147.

<sup>195</sup> See Chapter 1.

<sup>196</sup> Pearson, "I, the Undying," 196.

<sup>197</sup> Pearson, "I, the Undying," 196. Further page references are in the main text. See also Turcotte, "Remastering the Ghosts," 146–147) on this matter, and Clark, "Terror as White Female," 126), who depicts Amelia's character as "excessive."

<sup>198</sup> Pearson takes her cue from Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (New York: Penguin, 1990): 179.

Mudrooroo's vampiress takes Dracula's subversive qualities to further postmodernizing and postcolonizing extremes; so, rather than eurocentric, Gerry Turcotte sees her as "more optimistically hybrid" (190–192), as implied in the closing pages of *The Promised Land*,

demonstrat[ing] that the very idea of an isolated and pure whiteness has always been an impossibility [...] it is possible to read Mudrooroo's strangely (and initially) upbeat, and undeniably 'contaminated' figure, in a similarly 'positive' sense, as suggesting a new world order and another way forward.<sup>199</sup>

The perceived political incorrectness of this estranging, supradialectical cultural space would certainly offer the renegade 'Indigenous' author an uncanny home.

### **White Lie or Capital Offence?**

Mudrooroo's Tasmanian quintet follows a development in characterization and plot that aligns with the shifting locations of Indigeneity within Australianness and Australian multiculturalism as of the early 1990s. *Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription* engages with the Gothic, whereas *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* fashions Magical Realism into Maban Reality, which I have analyzed as an instance of Aboriginal Reality. Maban Reality's agenda allows the move from a defeatist to a celebratory projection of Indigenous survival under white civilization. This development is on a par with the change from assimilation to multiculturalism and new Native Title legislation under progressive federal rule. The Vampire trilogy, however, moves beyond the dialectical reversal of power structures in *Doctor* and *Master* so as to announce the end of all civilization through a return to Gothic gore. This reflects the vexed contestation of Mudrooroo's 'Indigenous' identity, as well as the heavy impact of a decade-long

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<sup>199</sup> Turcotte, "Vampiric Decolonization," 110.



backlash on Indigenous rights captained by three successive conservative governments as of 1996, responsible for fueling a heated, divisive debate on the place and definition of Indigeneity within Australia. Mudrooroo's fiction offers harrowing readings of both the private and the public condition of Australianness, bringing a quintet of de(con)structive potential to its fullest, nihilist thrust through the spectrality of a white female vampire. This fictional construct offers him a way of controlling the racial and maternal issues which have had such a troubling influence on his life.

Mudrooroo's white vampiress exists in a nonsignifying space, representing colonizer and colonized alike, refuses the more Manichean reversals of race, gender and class proposed in *Doctor* and *Master*, and makes room for the author's disturbing, contested status in the Australian identity debate through spectral returns in his fiction. While participating in this debate through the characters of George and Wadawaka, in the final reading the author is arguably conflated with the white vampiress, and vampirizes her in turn to suit his own needs, enacted in Wadawaka and Amelia's merger and George's loss of human status at the end of the Vampire series. Thus, Wendy Pearson understands Mudrooroo's fictions as a reflection of his changing identity: a continuous series of reinventions that refuse a reading as a "totalizing whole" (198–199).<sup>200</sup> Similarly, Gerry Turcotte argues

whatever judgment is eventually brought to bear on the 'validity' and 'authenticity' of his works, there can be no question that this reinvention is a masterful stroke, a work of amazing sang froid.<sup>201</sup>

His fictions project the immortality of the elusive, haunting vampire onto Mudrooroo's corpse/corpus, speaking for a writer largely vanished from Australian physical and discursive territory (200). His body expelled to, or beyond, the geographical margins of Australia, Mudrooroo's specter continues to exist, invading the liminalities of

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<sup>200</sup> I would rather opt for the term 'totalizing w/hole' for its nihilistic quality.

<sup>201</sup> Turcotte, "Vampiric Decolonization," 115.

Australianness, as his alleged presence in the Brisbane area indicates.<sup>202</sup>

By letting the white working-class vampiress speak for him, Mudrooroo makes his case against ontologies of presence as ‘authenticity’ in an attempt to render porous the race, class, and gender boundaries through which eurocentric master-narratives are inscribed and validated. Victor Hart maintains that the label of authenticity “defin[es] art in such a way that its delivery of cultural sustenance becomes commodified,” not believing that “authenticity exists as Aboriginality; if anything, it exists as a process.”<sup>203</sup> This sits well with Mudrooroo’s “‘mongrel’ signatures [...] as they show the scars of the multiple identifications which have made them so *productively impure*.<sup>204</sup>” The author’s burden of representation can be disentangled through his troubled and troubling fiction alone, which operates in a terrain of hybrid promiscuity that deconstructs and unpacks discrete race, gender, and class categories in a Derridean vein.

The Mudrooroo Affair proves the author’s strict policing of race and gender politics to be counterproductive in terms of his own personal history, but such policing is maintained in his theoretical

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<sup>202</sup> At a research seminar on Mudrooroo and spectrality, which I taught in 2012 for the center of Peace and Social Justice at Southern Cross University, Lismore NSW, what I took for a dead-ringer of the elusive author was sitting in the audience—I was not alone in believing this. He never identified himself or participated in the ensuing discussion but disappeared into thin air as soon as the seminar finished, though a colleague of mine, Janie Conway-Herron, unsuccessfully tried to follow him. His ‘spectral’ appearance suits my argument and coincides with the rumor that he had been spotted in the area, which in the past had also been a home base for him (see Mudrooroo, “Portrait of the Artist,” 10 of 23). I did, however, receive a communication from the author that he lives in the Brisbane area nowadays. In the same message he claims not to have attended my seminar, for being too old and sick to travel (Facebook, 16 March 2013).

<sup>203</sup> Hart, at a Griffith University seminar in August 2000; quoted in Shoemaker, “Mudrooroo and the Curse of Authenticity,” 18. The Label of Authenticity is a government initiative to guarantee that products commercialized are ‘authentically Aboriginal’ so that falsification and cheap copies of Aboriginal art and craft may be curtailed. The system, implemented as of 2000, is, according to Shoemaker, counterproductive and “doomed” due to its excessive bureaucracy (“Mudrooroo and the Curse of Authenticity,” 15–17).

<sup>204</sup> Oboe, “Introduction,” xvii (emphasis added).

work. In the midst of the ‘scandal’, he held that the existential conditions of Indigenous identity perhaps “needed to be addressed [...] from a *class* perspective,”<sup>205</sup> but omitted gender from this equation. The gender politics of his fiction remain similarly flawed; while “effectively and aggressively rewrit[ing] the white historical account of Aborigines as failed or inefficient warriors,” he does not “account for the power of Aboriginal women, or [...] overturn traditional patriarchal accounts of women (something which he struggles to overcome in *Master of the Ghost Dreaming*).”<sup>206</sup> The fictional character of the vampiress stands for woman as the destructor as well as the re/constructor of male identity in the author’s life. Thus, it should come as no surprise that in “Unmasking Mudrooroo,” an essay published shortly after the Vampire trilogy, Maureen Clark should argue that Mudrooroo’s racial identity has been determined by three women in his life: his poor, widowed mother, in having him late in life—he was born shortly after his father’s untimely death, disconnected from his much older siblings, and later institutionalized out of economic necessity; Dame Mary Durack, in offering him protection and promoting him as an ‘Aboriginal’ writer; and his sister Betty Polglaze, with her revealing research into the family’s mixed African-American/Irish origins.<sup>207</sup> And one could add Maureen Clark herself with her essay “Mudrooroo, a likely story” as a fourth, as it established the parameters of his ‘deceit’. To what extent this vexedness forms part of the trouble entailed in establishing Indigenous lineage through the ravages and damage inflicted by the abominable practice of ‘black velvet’, which also affected Sally Morgan’s personal biography, we will probably never know, but given that Mudrooroo has been married five times, one may conclude that his relationship with women has always been complex.

Clark also connects the author’s “alleged duplicity” (49) regarding his identity to his “career-long fascination” (57) with the controversial figure of George Augustus Robinson—the white

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<sup>205</sup> Mudrooroo, “Tell them you’re Indian,” 267 (emphasis added).

<sup>206</sup> Turcotte, “Remastering the Ghosts,” 138.

<sup>207</sup> Clark, “Unmasking Mudrooroo,” 49–52. Further page references are in the main text.

Missionary-Protector whose biography of self-interested impersonation and colonial self-fashioning on the backs of the Tasmanian Aborigines she sees as bearing “uncanny” resemblances with the author’s (58). This allows her to drive home her claim that Mudrooroo has always been a fraud. Her answer is symptomatic of the loss of credit and support suffered by the author:

Is Mudrooroo’s self-identification as an Aboriginal the fabrication of a shape-shifter, a trickster who has come to believe in the myth of his own trick? Is it conceivable that he has lived inauthentically, the false creator of Aboriginal cultural values who learned the tricks of his trade from George Augustus Robinson, that great master of betrayal himself? It is now clear that the author’s claim to Aboriginal genealogy is unfounded. His assertion of tribal belonging has been refuted. By his own admission, he engaged in a politics of the body that gave him entry into the Aboriginal cultural world and, paradoxically, a way out of the socially and economically disadvantaged world of the majority of the Aboriginal people. The evidence strongly suggests that, in the final analysis, the nature and extent of Mudrooroo’s feelings of social exile and abandonment were such that, as a young man, he *consciously appropriated* an Aboriginal identity as a means of practicing his art and of finding a place to belong. (59, emphasis added)

Though well documented and argued, Clark’s analysis suggests a self-interested intentionality that critics such as the urban-Indigenous writer-actor-activist Gary Foley<sup>208</sup> and the Canadian non-Indigenous academic Adam Shoemaker, both befriended by Mudrooroo, have

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<sup>208</sup>Gary Foley was involved in setting up the Aboriginal Tent embassy in front of Australian Parliament in 1972, and has held important political and university posts and leadership positions in the Aboriginal community; Adam Shoemaker has held important university posts in Australia and published extensively on Mudrooroo’s work over the last two decades—see Foley, “Who the hell is Gary Foley?” at *The Koori History Website: Voices from Black Australia* (nd), [http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/whoisgf/who\\_is\\_he.html](http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/whoisgf/who_is_he.html) (accessed 12 March 2016).

found hard to validate. The late Indigenous writer Ruby Langford Ginibi and some feminist scholars are in agreement with these male peers as well. In a review of Maureen Clark's article, an Australian specialist in women's studies, Denise Cuthbert, concludes:

Overall, the essay is well-researched and refreshingly honest about this undeniably shady and once judgemental writer's identity constructions. It is thus unfortunate that Clark comes across as a little extreme towards the end of the piece. Moreover, persuasive as parts of her essay may be, one wonders what is achieved in terms of insights into Aboriginality—and for that matter non-Aboriginality—through this exposé.<sup>209</sup>

Would it not be more productive to lift the Mudrooroo Affair out of the visceral ethical context in which it has been embedded for two decades now, and treat it as the unwelcome but inevitable by-product of a discursive shift in Indigeneity, a kind of collateral damage? What seemed an acceptable course of action in one discursive context may appear as its abominable opposite in another across the disjunction of time and political regimes.

In other words, the uncanny effect of postcolonizing the discourse on Australianness is precisely that it may turn a minor white lie (Mudrooroo's acceptance of an Indigenous identity born, allegedly, out of racist interpellation as well as a sense of solidarity) into a major White Lie (his existentialist stance is felt to be an appropriation because inspired by white racist discourse), and so into a Capital Offence (what seemed a little problem in one era becomes a major issue in a later era, critical of the imposition of a mainstream discourse on Indigeneity). There is both belligerence and entrapment in Mudrooroo's discursive silence and positioning that needs addressing: the figure of the vampiress is as vexed as it is empowering, and thus Mudrooroo's work represents a disruptive, nihilist 'black hole' as well as an opportunity, a constitutive 'black whole'; these circulate through each other in uncanny ways,

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<sup>209</sup> Denise Cuthbert et al., "Aboriginal Identity, Culture and Art," *The Year's Work in Critical & Cultural Theory* 11.8 (August 2003): 228.

simultaneously deconstructing and reconstructing identity, both claiming agency and succumbing to its lack. Through a vampiric “model of undecidability and disruption,”<sup>210</sup> Mudrooroo tries to find a way out of his burden of representation, rearticulating his own corpo-reality in the Australian land and textscape as a haunting specter that questions a politics of the body which relies on an ontology of material presence, immanent truth, and authenticity.<sup>211</sup>

The Indigenous theorist Aileen Moreton-Robinson posits an ontological bind between the Indigene and the land that is not accessible to non-Indigenous Australians, and denounces the deconstructionist critique of such an epistemology as the assimilationist imposition of the universality of Western discourse.<sup>212</sup> I confess that my deconstruction of myself necessarily makes me wary of any ontological claims to identity, and that *is* a problem that poises postmodernity against postcoloniality. However, if we can understand Moreton-Robinson to be wielding an Indigenous ontology as the *strategic* tool in minority identity formation without which embodiment would be impossible and politically disempowering, then postmodernism and postcolonialism are not necessarily at odds. This would also explain why any politics of the minority body must always provoke inevitable collateral damage: identitarian exclusion is not a natural given but a necessary evil in the battle for empowerment, as no discourse can ever cover and assimilate the totality of the real, and so embody, to follow Derrida’s and Žižek’s analyses.

Amelia and Wadawaka’s union is both a new, postcolonial/postmodern beginning and a redemptive wish-fulfillment at the price of writing Indigeneity into canine obedience. The particulars of this triangle must be taken as Mudrooroo’s reckoning with his Indigenous detractors and Indigeneity at large, which obviously will raise little sympathy, as it constitutes a masculinist self-justification against a rejection based on notions of blood; his attempt to maintain some hold on Australian soil by

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<sup>210</sup> Turcotte, “Vampiric Decolonization,” 114.

<sup>211</sup> See Chapter 1.

<sup>212</sup> Aileen Moreton-Robinson, “‘I Still Call Australia Home’: Place and Belonging in a White Postcolonising Society,” in *Uprootings/Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration*, ed. Sara Ahmed et al. (London: Berg, 2003): 32.

conceptualizing a form of 'black dreaming' and 'black title'; and his way of configuring a 'black Australianness' beyond existing binaries in which he may inscribe himself. As the uncanny turned flesh, Mudrooroo constitutes a defamiliarizing corpo-reality that may never be comfortably settled on Australia's identitarian battlefield, making the author a Derridean revenant, a corpse that is never to incorporate as fully present or alive in identity discourse.<sup>213</sup> The Gothic characteristic of "promiscuous changeability"<sup>214</sup> is applicable to the author's fiction and person, both uneasily enmeshed in notions of legitimacy. Caught up between maternal productivity and paternal authority, Mudrooroo's fiction and corpo-reality are trapped in an oedipal contradiction; for all the misogyny his vampiric rewritings exude, they also constitute a desperate inscription in the feminine, and steer its 'politically-incorrect' impurity away from the dis-covery of authenticity toward the articulation and performance of identity. Crucially, that which is most monstrously and frightfully scripted in his novels, the feminine, may most liberate the author and his political agenda, thus constituting a revelatory comment on what Marcia Langton analyzes as the self-defeating prevalence of a male-chauvinist discourse in Indigenous politics.<sup>215</sup>

In truth, the author's nihilistic inscription in vampiric nonsignification is hardly compatible with an effective politics of the Indigenous body within a mainstream politico-legal framework informed by a racist past. Indigenous identity politics must insist upon at least some Indigenous 'blood' in order to verify and flesh out Indigenous corpo-reality. This is a political decision, as Kim Scott argues,<sup>216</sup> and homes in on the paradox that any politics of the body should be considered in part strategic precisely because it employs ontology of presence—essentialism—as a *chosen* as well as *imposed* means to achieve its empowering aims. Michael Dodson says as much when he vaunts the authentication of an Indigenous bloodline, what he calls the Aborigine's "experienced connection to the past,"<sup>217</sup> as a

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<sup>213</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 6, 11.

<sup>214</sup> Turcotte, "Vampiric Decolonization," 115.

<sup>215</sup> Marcia Langton, "Trapped in the Aboriginal reality show," *Griffith Review* 19 (Autumn 2008): 146.

<sup>216</sup> See the next chapter for an in-depth discussion of Scott's take.

<sup>217</sup> Dodson, "The end in the beginning," 10.

vehicle for political engagement. What the real must necessarily display as a prediscursive solid presence reveals itself as a still shot of identity in flux—the never-ending process of adaptation to change.<sup>218</sup>

Nevertheless, it is significant that Mudrooroo has not been willing to come forward and submit his Indigeneity to the consideration of the Nyoongar mob he claimed kinship to.<sup>219</sup> Much would be gained if Mudrooroo acknowledged Nyoongar protocol and authority on this matter rather than failing the purport of his own theoretical writings. Yet, it would force the author to ‘own up’ on an issue that has grown beyond his control and that may very well be conducive to payback, perhaps instilling the fear that the Nyoongar community might be out for his blood in the punitive as well as the genetic sense—and who would blame them after so many years of having been defined by the mainstream? The fact that Mudrooroo would not address his purported kin when they offered him an opening to resolve the deadlock suggests that the author has something to hide, and this corrodes his credibility. Maureen Clark shows little doubt about Mudrooroo’s fraudulent behavior but is also adamant that its “revelation [...] raises even more challenging questions about the significance of race as *the* location of identity in Australian society.”<sup>220</sup> She goes on to say:

much like his imaginary characters, there can be no final solution to the mystery of what otherwise might have been had Mudrooroo not, metaphorically and actually, been infected and consumed by a system of social inequality underpinned by black and white relations of power. This is an unknowable side of the author’s history that hinges on a covert partnership between violator and violated—powerful

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<sup>218</sup> The last quarter of the twentieth century has seen the slow re-incorporation of many Stolen Generations members and their descent into Indigenous communities, for example, responding to discursive changes in the definition of Indigeneity resulting from the civil rights achievements as of the late 1960s.

<sup>219</sup> Clark, “Unmasking Mudrooroo,” 50.

<sup>220</sup> Clark, “Mudrooroo: a likely story,” 292, italics in original.



and powerless—an unholy sharing of circumstances that still endures and much like the vampire, may never die.<sup>221</sup>

These lines are reminiscent of the Vampire trilogy's closing pages and recognize that Mudrooroo fell prey to a eugenic social context and in succumbing acted in 'dark' complicity with the colonizer. This criticism is illustrative of the fraught complexity of a debate that since the new millennium has resorted to the cloak of silence as its most salient feature. Mudrooroo's unresponsiveness has been met with overall rejection and silence: "No one acknowledged my existence let alone would publish me,"<sup>222</sup> as Mudrooroo complained in 2012. The way racist pressure on Indigeneity as un-Australian identity and control over its definition have shifted has ostensibly trapped Mudrooroo in an identitarian no man's land whose nihilist burden of representation he must willy-nilly bear.

For all its vampiric unboundedness, the troubling evidence of this is to be found in Mudrooroo's fiction. Even though the Vampire trilogy anxiously demands the dissolution of constricting binaries, it evidently cannot escape from the material bases of class, gender, and race that call these into being and so inform the author's very spectrality. The sustained anger of the revelatory closing scene of the Vampire trilogy writes itself out of Aboriginal Reality. Mudrooroo's long exile and retirement from active political and artistic engagement suggest that his ostracization, profiled in Adam Shoemaker's request for clemency that accompanied Mudrooroo's 2012 'testamentary confession', knows no end.<sup>223</sup> As Shoemaker puts it,

for very good reasons, Mudrooroo was hoist on his own petard of *hubris* and chauvinism. He was trapped by his own tightly-wound, exclusionary theory of Indigenality. But the result was far more dramatic, more total and more long-lasting than most of us had anticipated.

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<sup>221</sup> "Mudrooroo: a likely story," 301.

<sup>222</sup> Mudrooroo, "Portrait of the Artist," 19 of 23.

<sup>223</sup> His article reacts to Mudrooroo's "testament" in *JASAL*—see Mudrooroo, "Portrait of the Artist."

Shoemaker concludes (and I would agree) that “the identity politics of exclusion (and inclusion) on the basis of race alone can be as *pernicious* as any other prejudice.”<sup>224</sup> The Mudrooroo Affair can be read as subject to epistemic friction, a Fanonian manifestation of absolute violence whose excess beyond the instrumental in embodiment profiles the ambivalent, uncontainable borders where identity politics as ontological presence dissolves; where it reveals itself as a *strategic* choice of inclusion and exclusion, an imposition of discrete order upon the fluid nature of identity, however justified, inevitable, and necessary this is as the political lever in minority empowerment.

In other words, this uncanny circulation of absolute and strategic violence may be understood as a question of perspective: what appears as absolute to one side manifests itself as strategic to the other. Thus, the virulence of Mudrooroo’s exclusion can be read as the need to exorcize the closeness that threatens to disrupt the discrete boundaries of the Indigenous self. The violence resulting from such a ‘too close for comfort’ manifestation (a postcolonial reversal of Homi Bhabha’s colonial “the same, but not quite”) marks the impossibility of tracing identitarian borders as finite, authentic, and ‘true’. On this count, Mudrooroo’s ostracization and long exile are the inevitable collateral damage that obtains on the slippery borders of body politics and epistemic shift. The visceral political climate around Indigeneity, which Marcia Langton describes as prone to “lateral violence,”<sup>225</sup> maintains its spell over Mudrooroo’s public and private persona, precisely because he cannot ‘be’ Indigenous.

How has the author dealt with this conundrum in the public arena? After a long silence, Mudrooroo published his literary and political reckoning to acquit himself of the charge of fraudulent and self-interested usurpation of Indigenous identity.<sup>226</sup> The text bears the rather pathetic title “Portrait of the Artist as a Sick Old Villain ‘Me Yes

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<sup>224</sup> Mudrooroo, “Portrait of the Artist,” 2 and 5 of 10 (emphasis added).

<sup>225</sup> Marcia Langton, “The End of ‘Big Men’ Politics,” *Griffith Review* 22 (2008): 11–38.

Langton points out how oppressed groups may violently turn on each other out of frustration and anger, directing them rather against themselves than the circumstances that cause them.

<sup>226</sup> Mudrooroo, “Portrait of the Artist,” 20–21 of 23.

I Am He the Villain': Reflections of a Bloke From Outside," which suggests unjust accusations, lack of being properly understood, male-chauvinist rebelliousness, utter loneliness, and a plea for help and compassion. Its confessional quality aims to engage the reader's sympathy and clemency but textual honesty is put into question when Mudrooroo stakes the postmodern claim that "*my place* lies in the discourse and even outright lies may be part of that place which must be explored in close or counter reading methodology. Indeed what is hidden is to be discussed,"<sup>227</sup> taking the argument into the uncanny.

I will take the writer up on his challenge. The "testament" is written in the emasculating grip of prostate cancer and so from a ghostly domain between life and death that necessarily hinges on race as well as gender; it was initially meant as a "deathbed confession" with its generic claim on truth. The overlap between race and gender is given further profile by Mudrooroo's false allegation<sup>228</sup> that the female artifex of his troubles, Betty Polglaze, has died, which would now allow him to "set the record straight." Showing that Mudrooroo has a long memory and stakes a very specific claim in this piece, he employs exactly the same wording—"set the record straight"—as was used in the 1996 Nyoongar invitation to come forward and discuss his Indigeneity, which he never took up.<sup>229</sup> What is more, the challenge is worded as a barely veiled stab at Sally Morgan's autobiography *My Place*. When one also takes into account that the author's life was slowly restoring and Betty Polglaze was alive at the moment of writing,<sup>230</sup> the article partakes in *presumed* truth by being derived from a format and convention intimately connected to alleged textual honesty. Thus, the author as trickster

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<sup>227</sup> Mudrooroo, "Portrait of the Artist," 3 of 23.

<sup>228</sup> Confirmed by Anne Brewster and Maureen Clark in private conversations in November 2013.

<sup>229</sup> The expression 'set the record straight' was used by the Kickett family a decade earlier when inviting Mudrooroo to come forward and settle the issue of his belonging—see Gerhard Fischer, "Mis-Taken Identity: Mudrooroo and Gordon Matthews," in *Race, Colour and Identity in Australia and New Zealand*, ed. John Docker & Gerhard Fischer (Sydney: U of New South Wales P, Sydney 2000): 96, quoted in Clark, "Unmasking Mudrooroo," 59.

<sup>230</sup> Mudrooroo, "Portrait of the Artist," 20–21 of 23.

rises like a phoenix from his own ashes—again. Although he is careful not to use capitalized ‘Indigenous’, ‘Aboriginal’ or ‘Black’ in front of “man”, he keeps employing Mudrooroo Nyoongah as his penname, leaving his options open. In the face of these typical, unsettling ambiguities, his final plea that those who do not “love” him should at least try to “understand” his life and actions in the context of his “survival as a black man in Western Australia” has the ring of a desperate cry for compassion and for help as well as a veiled, long-awaited confession of guilt that, in mutual solicitation, fail to convince.<sup>231</sup> It befits Maureen Clark’s earlier quoted observation that

whatever one’s view, the Mudrooroo narrative continues to be a controversial subject constituted and performed within the racist framework of self-representation and belonging in Australia.”<sup>232</sup>

Mudrooroo’s masculinist aloofness and belligerence, which develop out of the fraught quality of Indigeneity’s postcolonizing framework, prove her assessment right.

In my final reading, the Mudrooroo corpse/corpus constitutes itself as an epistemological black w/whole that leaves no escape, either for the author or for his reader; it sucks both into a dark, disturbing universe of shifting subject positions and ethical perceptions, forever denying a sense of allegiance and homecoming. Patient as well as agent, victim as well as fraud, this self-appointed “blackfella masquerading as a blackfella”<sup>233</sup> remains caught in a disturbing limbo between haunting and haunted notions of the (Ab)original and fake that puts identity as ontological presence to the test; subject to political interests and allegiances, it reminds us that what incorporates through the magic of discourse is ultimately transitory, opaque, and changeable while parading as fixed, solid, and transparent. As Mudrooroo wrote, “I ha[ve] discovered that identity is a fragile thing and can be taken away, just as it can be given,”<sup>234</sup>

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<sup>231</sup> Mudrooroo, “Portrait of the Artist,” 21.

<sup>232</sup> Clark, “Mudrooroo: a likely story,” 301.

<sup>233</sup> Quoted in Shoemaker, “Mudrooroo and the Curse of Authenticity,” 19, from a personal interview with the author on 17 April 2001 in Brisbane.

<sup>234</sup> Mudrooroo, “Tell them you’re Indian,” 263.

and that is a sad conclusion, in view of how he prepared the ground for Indigenous Studies and Literature.

Yet, what appears as irreconcilable in Mudrooroo's identity to the non-Indigenous observer also uncovers the discursive limits of white, and thus my own, understanding of Indigenous Australianness and its politics. As Alison Ravenscroft's critique of Gelder and Jacobs's *Uncanny Australia* indicates, the uncanniness that Native Title implied for the Australian mainstream was only the revelation of what had always been self-evident and crystal-clear to the First Nations: white invasion and misappropriation, be it of Indigenous land, cultural resources, or identity. If this is so, Mudrooroo's ostracization is likely to continue. Besides his fraught 'testament', we only have the Mudrooroo corpus as Mudrooroo's reply to the challenge of his identity and good faith, but as this is the relatively safe terrain of fiction, we will probably never see a single satisfactory, convincing truth behind the affair, if there is one. Whether taken as a confession of guilt or not, much would be gained if the author were to acknowledge publicly that he should be considered black Australian rather than Indigenous Australian on the current definition of Indigeneity, but the vexed entanglement of ethnic as ethical choice makes one fear the worst. Yet, his Vampire trilogy, though displaying nihilist and discomfiting political engagement, may be read as a step in that redemptive direction.

Will an enabling configuration of Mudrooroo's identity be constituted outside Australian Indigeneity, and shall such a postcolonial corpo-reality participate in configuring Fanon's 'new human'? If so, the execution of such a project depends on more factors than the postcolonizing and postmodernizing powers of Mudrooroo's fictional imagination alone, and begs a politics of strategic allegiances. In the 1970s, well before the advent of Mabo, Kevin Gilbert argued that Indigeneity is open to all as long as they abide by a set of communal rules that enable self-respect and dignified living<sup>235</sup> His findings, given force by being offered by the invented Indigenous Elder "Grandfather Koori," are strategically placed at the end of *Living Black*, and close a set of interviews with Indigenous people of different walks of life about the meaning of

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<sup>235</sup> Gilbert, *Living Black*, 299–305.

Indigeneity. His conclusion, invested with the power of Indigenous authority and experience, makes two important points: first, that Indigeneity in the period contiguous upon Mudrooroo's 'passing' as Indigenous was very much an existentialist issue; second, that the rules as to what Indigeneity signifies and entitles one to in the Australian context have changed substantially since the advent of the Native Title legislation, as Cassandra Pybus also records.<sup>236</sup> In my view, all of this has placed Mudrooroo neither inside nor outside but right *on* the uncanny margins of Indigeneity, a locus still too vexed and too close for comfort.

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<sup>236</sup> Pybus, "From 'Black' Caesar to Mudrooroo," 38.

## 4

# Kim Scott's 'Storying' Beyond the Dead Heart

I think a lot of it, throughout the book, is about nurture. Nurture through story. If you believe it, and talk it, then it becomes real.<sup>1</sup>

### Kim Scott, 'the First White Man Born'

Authenticity has been a disturbing presence in Indigenous identity, so that Indigeneity remains a fuzzy concept in a wide variety of cultural expressions. In Australian letters, Indigenous stereotypes are questioned and reconfigured time and again by the appearance of new and challenging authors and bodies of work, unsettling the parameters of what it means to be Indigenous and fueling their public debate. The Western Australian writer Kim Scott<sup>2</sup> is a case of marginal Indigeneity openly vaunted to break down its static, engrained definition. Thus, he aims to accommodate a vast array of Australians who would not easily be considered Indigenous in terms of authenticity in the belief that

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Guy, "Kim Scott in Conversation with Elizabeth Guy," *Westerly* 41.3 (Spring 1996): 11.

<sup>2</sup> Scott was sent to school in Narrogin, Mudrooroo's place of birth, "an inland town, where he saw the impact of racism on the large community of Nyoongars"—see K. Kunhikrishnan, "Identity Narratives" (review), and "Reclaiming a Heritage" (interview), in *The Hindu* (06 April 2003), <http://www.thehindu.com/thehindu/lr/2003/04/06/stories/2003040600180300.htm> (accessed 3 May 2008). Like Sally Morgan, Scott has been living in a suburb of Perth—see Kim Scott, *True Country* (Fremantle, WA: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1993): 4.

politically, we need to promote pluralities and diverse ways of being Indigenous. Like—what about the man who writes literary novels? You're an *anomaly*, because of our damaged history, but that's who you are.<sup>3</sup>

His “damaged history” ambivalently locates him as a “quite white” suburban professional, not “shar[ing] the immediate experience of oppression and racism that the majority of Nyoongars do, and which is therefore probably an important part of their sense of identity.”<sup>4</sup> This notwithstanding, he has managed to firmly anchor himself to an Aboriginal identity through his literary work and personal commitment from a liminal location which defies Manichean understandings of Indigeneity.<sup>5</sup> On the one hand, this is made possible by the modesty with which he envisages his literary project, which—unlike Mudrooroo's—is never conceived of as normative and inscribed in his “wish [not] to be seen as a spokesperson” but dependent upon the authority of his Indigenous community.<sup>6</sup>

On the other hand, while his descent is not spelled out on his body, the Indigenous line through his paternal grandmother was never hidden from him and was handed down by his father as a kind of “sullen resentment, an inarticulate pride.”<sup>7</sup> Scott therefore struggles with this “weak way to define [him]self”<sup>8</sup> and uses his literary work as the primary means to trace, plot, and flesh out the silences and gaps in his Aboriginal heritage, in deconstructive fashion wondering

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<sup>3</sup> Kim Scott, “What does it mean to be Aboriginal,” *ATSIC Publications* (2000): emphasis added, [http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/41037/20050516-0000/www.atsic.gov.au/news\\_room/atsic\\_news/February\\_2000/what\\_Does\\_It\\_Mean\\_To\\_Be.html](http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/41037/20050516-0000/www.atsic.gov.au/news_room/atsic_news/February_2000/what_Does_It_Mean_To_Be.html) (accessed 7 May 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Kunhikrishnan, “Identity Narratives.”

<sup>5</sup> For the concept of liminality, see Chapter 1.

<sup>6</sup> Kunhikrishnan, “Identity Narratives.”

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Buck, “Trees That Belong Here: An Interview with Award-Winning Australian Author, Kim Scott,” *Boomtown Magazine* 1.3 (2001), [www.boomtownmag.com/articles/200101/benang.htm](http://www.boomtownmag.com/articles/200101/benang.htm) (16 February 2005). In an interview, Scott comments that “I'm [...] wary of being niched in the mainstream [...] and it seemed to me to start off as ‘here I am, the first white man born in the family line’ was to avoid that pigeonhole, and to be very provocative.” See Scott, “What does it mean to be Aboriginal.”

<sup>8</sup> Scott, “What does it mean to be Aboriginal.”



whether his writing is “revealing [his] Indigenosity, or revealing the absence of it.”<sup>9</sup> Yet, his father’s oral testimony places him in a more advantageous, ‘authenticated’ position than Sally Morgan or Mudrooroo, and, in another instance of the uncanny become flesh, Scott negotiates identity between Indigenosity and a European appearance and lifestyle. Thus, the protagonist of *Benang*, who struggles with his inscription as the ‘first white man born’ in the family, is evidently modeled on Scott’s personal experience and proffered as a fictional model from which to investigate the author’s hybrid identity and find a valid speaking position.<sup>10</sup>

Validated by his kin’s testimony and couched in the Indigenous community, Scott addresses the (re)configuration of Australianness without much resistance or doubt from the mainstream. He joins Sally Morgan in “a contemporary, hybrid articulation of Indigenosity, exposing experiences of cultural difference which a more purist approach such as Mudrooroo’s *Writing from the Fringe* could work to suppress” and thus helps to “contribute to the relocation of Indigenosity from a site of repression and secrecy to one of public exchange.”<sup>11</sup> Whereas Sally Morgan’s earlier, hybrid inscription of Indigenosity remains controversial,<sup>12</sup> Kim Scott’s carefully self-reflexive art more successfully configures an embracing sense of subjectivity within the possibilities of a strategic employment of identity, advocating for inclusiveness after Indigenosity has been expressed.<sup>13</sup> As a token of “strange cultural survival,”<sup>14</sup> his writing confronts Australians with a silenced, unprocessed past but also forges a notion of solidarity across racial boundaries. Addressing mainstream efforts at reconciliation with Indigenous Australianness,

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<sup>9</sup> John Fielder, “Country and Connections: An Overview of the Writing of Kim Scott” *Altitude* 6 (Curtin University of Technology 2006): 2 of 12, <http://www.apinetwork.com/cgi-bin/altitude21c/fly?page=Issue6&n=1> (accessed 3 May 2008): 2.

<sup>10</sup> Buck, “Trees that Belong Here.”

<sup>11</sup> Eleanor Hogan, “Kim Scott’s *True Country* as Borderline Aboriginal Writing,” *Westerly* 43.2 (1998): 99–100.

<sup>12</sup> See Chapter 3. *True Country* was published in 1993, six years after *My Place*.

<sup>13</sup> Scott, “What does it mean to be Aboriginal.”

<sup>14</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, “DissemiNation: Time, narrative, and the margins of the modern nation,” in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990): 320.

he insists on peaceful confrontation with and acceptance of the Aboriginal communities' "compassion, spiritual generosity, bravery and inclusiveness,"<sup>15</sup> advocating for "the return and consolidation to the Nyoongar community of [...] our cultural heritage as a priority."<sup>16</sup> His novel *That Deadman Dance* (2010) espouses such an agenda.

Scott has managed to trace his Indigenous origins to Western Australia's south coast, and he has been accepted into its local Nyoongar mob. This is reflected in his writing, which becomes increasingly autobiographical in tone, focus, and localization and then expansive again; it fastens itself onto the area of his wider family's homeland while maintaining a notable, groundbreaking effort in experimentation with content, style, and genre. Thus, his first novel, *True Country* (1993), is a "semi-autobiographical work"<sup>17</sup> of fiction, loosely inspired by his teaching experience in the Kimberley; it addresses the politics of identity formation by using a polyphonic narrative perspective which interrogates the genre of Indigenous life writing, Western auto/biography and the realist novel. His second novel, *Benang* (1999), investigates, fictionalizes, and reassesses his family history by critically reworking "the hostile nature" of archival material from the assimilationist period and turning its language back on itself, as he claims.<sup>18</sup> *Benang* also works with multiple shifts of perspective and polyphony, but adds fragmentary and nonlinear storytelling techniques as narrative devices as well, equally breaking away from realist formulations of the autobiography and novel.

Scott has moved from semi-autobiography in *True Country* and *Benang* to full-fledged fiction in his award-winning novel *That Deadman Dance* (2010), after a strategic stopover in tribal community to address local history in *Kayang and Me* (2005). His third novel, *That Deadman Dance*, is an account set in the 'friendly frontier' area of Albany, Western Australia in the early 1800s. It explores the first contact between the local Nyoongars and settlers

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<sup>15</sup> Buck, "Trees that Belong Here."

<sup>16</sup> Kunhikrishnan, "Identity Narratives."

<sup>17</sup> Sudha Rai, "Singing the World Anew: Learning, Narration and Collaborative Culture in Kim Scott's *True Country*," in *Caring Cultures: Sharing Imaginations. Australia and India*, ed. Anraag Sharma & Pradee Trikha (New Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2007): 43.

<sup>18</sup> Scott, quoted in Fielder, "Country and Connections," 2 of 12.

and its slow development into a tense, conflictive encounter of two different worlds. It marks a significant move in the completion of his process of self-definition as an Indigenous person, and also in the formulation of his fiction as an aesthetic as well as political expression of an Indigenous Australianness open to all, which was rewarded with 2010's Miles Franklin Literary Award. In analytical terms, this novel is a first-contact reimagining from an Indigenous perspective that works along the lines of *Aboriginal Reality*, as in Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*.

His nonfiction prose publication *Kayang and Me* was written between *Benang* and *That Deadman Dance*, and represents an important parenthesis in his novelistic production.<sup>19</sup> The reason for this excursion into nonfiction is easily understood as the ongoing need for Scott to explore his own sense of place in the Nyoongar country to which his extended family belongs. Scott feels that

holding the tension is difficult and complex: at once struggling to connect with Noongar people and storytelling traditions whilst also being a literary novelist [...] [which] doesn't eradicate the fact that you are still a Noongar.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, Scott's joint narrative with one of his Indigenous elders/aunts veers away from fiction to bear critically on local fact as recorded by Indigenous oral tradition as well as Western written sources. It juxtaposes the family stories and personal recollections of his Indigenous relative and elder, Hazel Brown, against a larger framework of reflections in a socio-political and historical context elaborated from personal memories and archival material. It offers a productive dialogue revising the mainstream's rendering of local history from an Indigenous perspective, and constitutes a local micro-narrative that unmasks the discomfiting gaps and silences in Western "metanarrative" or "grand narrative."<sup>21</sup> This development in Scott's writing stands in interesting contrast to the work of

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<sup>19</sup> "Country and Connections," 8 of 12.

<sup>20</sup> "Country and Connections," 8 of 12.

<sup>21</sup> François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, tr. Geoffrey Bennington & Brian Massumi (*La Condition postmoderne: Rapport sur le savoir*, 1979, Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984): xxiii-iv.

Mudrooroo, whose identity trouble forces him to write himself increasingly out of Australia, locating his 'promised land' elsewhere, while it revives and elaborates on Sally Morgan's life writing under conditions of a metafictional and deconstructionist kind. The collaboration with his Auntie Hazel could have also informed his fourth novel to date, *Taboo* (2017), which for the first time in his fiction features a woman as the main character and sees Scott closing in on 'women's business'. Exploring yet another field of Nyoongar experience, it offers a girl's perspective on the transgenerational trauma generated by a notorious massacre at what has since become a taboo site in southern Western Australia for his Indigenous kin, who were the target of the killing, as was already recounted in *Benang*.<sup>22</sup>

Scott speaks of his writing as "storying" in an effort to express its sense of experimentation. It is undoubtedly a literary reconfiguration of the Indigenous oral storytelling tradition, known as 'yarning',<sup>23</sup> that reworks the parameters of mainstream genres and develops into Scott's version of Aboriginal Reality:

In Noongyar [sic] there is a different way of thinking that is available to address continuity and cultural change [...] That's something I try and work with when I am *storying* but I don't feel it is appropriate to try and prescribe or delineate this.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, Scott's experimentation responds to a postcolonizing agenda, as it reflects his critical stance toward the politics of Australian identity, art, and culture:

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<sup>22</sup> This chapter cannot dedicate any space to *Taboo*'s analysis for reasons of time and length.

<sup>23</sup> Buck, "Trees that Belong Here." In informal English, a yarn is a "long, often elaborate narrative of real or fictitious adventures; an entertaining tale"—see "yarn," in *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition* (Houghton Mifflin, 2004; Answers.com, 2008), <http://www.answers.com/topic/yarn> (accessed 14 Jul. 2008). Among Aborigines, the oral storytelling tradition is often referred to as 'yarning' but incorporates the Dreaming and as such goes beyond the fictitious and merely entertaining—see Mudrooroo's *Milli Milli Wangka* and Chapter 6.

<sup>24</sup> Buck, "Trees that Belong Here," emphasis added.

In Australia we live in a cultural context of fraud, hoax and appropriation. That is white Australia appropriating sort of Aboriginal imagery and other things for an international image, and there are people pretending they are Aboriginal and so on and so on.<sup>25</sup>

On a deeper level, then, Scott explores the white mainstream psyche in his writing, which he deems “troubled, unstable, ambivalent.”<sup>26</sup> In order to reach this uncanny core of the national consciousness and breathe life into the ‘dead heart’ of Australian identity, his exploration takes place in terms not only of content but also of form, confronting the problem of ‘white forms, Aboriginal content’ addressed by Mudrooroo and others.<sup>27</sup> Thus, the Indigenous critic Philip Morrissey analyzes *Benang* in terms of its alienating effect on the mainstream reader, which brings us back to the uncanny as an effective tool for questioning Australianness:

the challenge to Aboriginal writing [...] is always to call new readers into existence. An Aboriginal text must make use of what Rimmon-Kenan terms “codes, frames [...] familiar to the reader,” but at the same time must prompt the reader to use these codes to discover what they *don't know*.<sup>28</sup>

Indeed, Scott's three novels to date can be analyzed with the aid of Morrissey's criteria for innovative Indigenous writing.

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<sup>25</sup> “Trees that Belong Here.”

<sup>26</sup> Fielder, “Country and Connections,” 5 of 12.

<sup>27</sup> Penny van Toorn, “A Journey Out/Back: Exploring Kim Scott's True Country,” in *Australian-Canadian Studies* 12.2 (1994): 46. She alludes to Mudrooroo/Colin Johnson, “White Forms, Aboriginal Content,” in *Aboriginal Writing Today*, ed. Jack Davis & Bob Hodge (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1983): 21–33.

<sup>28</sup> Philip Morrissey, “Aboriginal Writing,” in *The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture*, ed. Sylvia Kleinert & Margo Neale (Melbourne: Oxford UP, 2000): 320.

### **True Country: The Outback as the Country of the Heart**

Kim Scott's first novel, *True Country*, published in 1993, is born of "a quest to find [his] family roots, to identify the region of [his] Indigenous ancestors, and re-graft [him]self to a genealogy merging with a bountifully populated pre-colonial past."<sup>29</sup> In many ways, this "unconventional life narrative"<sup>30</sup> reflects the writer's confrontation with the blank page and his struggle to chart its white(ned) surface with the dark traces of his Indigenous belonging. It reflects a personal "journey out/back"<sup>31</sup> of discovery as well as recovery of Indigeneity embodied in country by rescribing the colonial palimpsest fiction of *terra nullius* as 'Terra Ab-Originum'. Similarly, it rearticulates his body, a 'Corpus Nullius' of sorts, as 'Corpus Ab-Originum', delivering his hybrid Indigeneity as Australianness, or, as Scott writes: "This novel began with a desire to explore a sort of *neglected interior space*, and to consider my own heritage."<sup>32</sup>

In order to map out this neglected interior space as a true country of the heart, Scott's fictional alter ego, Billy Storey, travels to the isolated margins of Australia. There, pristine Indigenous culture is interpellated by the overbearing modernity of the capitalist mode of production and by the policing of church and welfare state, in a tension which nevertheless shows an unexpected Indigenous capacity for adaptation and survival. The northwestern Australian outback constitutes a geographical configuration of Homi Bhabha's liminal Third Space from which national identities may be rewritten; the Kimberley is the 'undead' heartland that may feed the necessary life blood to Billy Storey's unfinished sense of Indigenous self. Thus, Billy's quest turns into the wish-fulfillment that was denied to Scott outside the text:

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<sup>29</sup> Kim Scott, "Strangers at home," in *Translating Lives. Living with Two Languages and Cultures*, ed. Mary Besemeres & Anna Wierzbicka (St Lucia: U of Queensland P, 2007): 2.

<sup>30</sup> Hogan, "Kim Scott's *True Country*," 98.

<sup>31</sup> Van Toorn, "A Journey Out/Back," 39-40.

<sup>32</sup> Scott, *True Country*, 8 (emphasis added).

the disappointment of not finding the country or people I came from fed my first novel, which I wrote with the lyrics of Midnight Oil's "Dead Heart" stuck to the wall beside my desk. The chorus of that song is defiant—how we carry the true country in our hearts, and how our ancestry cannot be broken—but I think the novel emerged from the chasm between affirmation of those lyrics and the title's sorry tale of loss. "True Country" indeed.<sup>33</sup>

This failure of Scott's own genealogical quest provides the dramatic tension from which he is able to map a true country of the heart for his fictional persona and himself on the empty white page; here both may come to (Indigenous) knowledge and successfully inscribe a new sense of identity from the perspective of acculturation, and comment on the nature versus nurture debate.<sup>34</sup>

Scott makes use of the *tabula rasa* concept, which prioritizes cultural over biological acquisition in the formation of one's personality, emotional and social behavior, and intelligence,<sup>35</sup> so that, still burdened by the question of his biological ancestry, he stated how *True Country* had helped him to establish a sense of identity: "I think a lot of it, throughout the book, is about *nurture*. Nurture through story. If you believe it, and talk it, then it becomes real."<sup>36</sup> However, Billy also goes through a process of *re*-acculturation, which allows *True Country* to be interpreted as a palimpsestic narrative, and this would put nature over nurture: i.e. the recovery of Indigenous

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<sup>33</sup> Kim Scott & Hazel Brown, *Kayang and Me* (Fremantle, WA: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2005): 16–17 (emphasis added). Midnight Oil was an Australian rock band famous for the political relevance of their lyrics and commitment to the Aboriginal cause.

<sup>34</sup> Mainstream versions of the outback as the country of the heart may paint a very different picture, highlighting white control of the land through the pastoralist industry.

<sup>35</sup> *Tabula rasa*, Latin for erased tablet or slate, may refer to "the mind before it receives the impressions gained from experience," "the unformed, featureless mind in the philosophy of John Locke." or "a need or an opportunity to start from the beginning"—see "tabula rasa," in *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004; Answers.com, 2008), <http://www.answers.com/topic/tabula-rasa> (accessed 15 July 2008).

<sup>36</sup> Guy, "Kim Scott in Conversation," 11 (emphasis added).

roots over mainstream education. Thus, the novel would evince his attempt to turn the fiction of *terra nullius*, a tabula rasa narrative imposed by white colonization, on its head by “storying” whatever fragments remain of the underlying *terra aboriginum* into a place of emotional and physical belonging.<sup>37</sup> Significantly, Scott believes that he “was trying to write in the *space* between the title and the affirmation” of Midnight Oil’s song,<sup>38</sup> and thus one may understand *True Country* as the liminal discursive space from which the author attempts to reconfigure Indigeneity and the foundations of Australianness by engaging with both nature and nurture:

Kim Scott uses the device of Billy’s mixed Aboriginal-European heritage to undo the logically prior practice of making binary categorical distinctions between self and other, black and white.<sup>39</sup>

### **Storying and Community Building**

Billy Storey forms part of the group of mainstream schoolteachers—aptly nicknamed “chalkies”<sup>40</sup>—that are employed at Karnama for the ‘social improvement’ of the Indigenous community. But as Billy’s sense of self is in a flux, riddled by “doubt [...] about me, the past, what I’m doing, where I belong, the future” (129), his project at the mission settlement also reveals itself as a learning process which aims to bridge and close the complex gap between an Indigenous and non-Indigenous sense of understanding the world. A fictional mirror image of the author, Billy tries to write on the blank page of his identity with the dark traces of his (unidentified) local Indigenous forebears, gathering and adapting Indigenous stories for himself as much as his Indigenous students. In this project, he is assisted by an

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<sup>37</sup> For a definition of palimpsest, see Chapter 2, footnote 62.

<sup>38</sup> Buck, “Trees that Belong Here” (emphasis added).

<sup>39</sup> Van Toorn, “A Journey Out/Back,” 41–42.

<sup>40</sup> Scott, *True Country*, 103. Further page references are in the main text. The epithet refers to the tool used in the transmission of Western knowledge as well as whiteness of skin and perceived mainstream identity. The irony in Billy’s case is clear.



important mission elder, Fatima, who wants to record Indigenous perceptions of local contact history: "I tell people, like I do now, to you, the right way it happened. The true way, and what we people think" (43–44).

*True Country* in this sense foreshadows the work Scott would successfully carry out years later with his Indigenous relative Hazel Brown in *Kayang and Me*, at a more settled stage of his own search for identity. Nevertheless, Billy's unsuccessful reading sessions in front of the classroom are on a par with his inability to tell/write his own story/Storey (245). Billy's metatextual considerations point to an acute problem of entitlement, as they "enact [...] the anxieties addressed [...] in identity politics about the right to 'speak for' others, especially subaltern others," because

the issues of appropriation and authority implicit in Billy's role as story-teller concern his rightfulness as an individual urban, white-educated Aboriginal to represent the narratives of a remote, tribal community.<sup>41</sup>

Yet, Billy's concerns are belied by *True Country's* status as a much-circulated and appreciated item of 'strange cultural survival', which testifies to the extent to which the author has managed to intervene successfully in the issue of postcolonizing identity formation. The great merit of Scott's first novel lies in its self-critical stance, which selfconsciously addresses the conceptual problems of transferring the genres of the auto/biography and the realist novel into Indigenous life writing. These cover questions such as: where do the borders between fact and fiction lie? How can alien Western literary traditions transmit Indigenous experience without calling into doubt the author's Indigenous identity? To what extent is a linear, realist auto/biographical mode appropriate for addressing postmodern and postcolonial identity formation as it engages manifestly different worlds? Kim Scott's novel avoids the shortcomings of *My Place*—the miraculous romantic recovery of an Indigenous genealogy in the outback and the subsequent retreat to suburbia—and significantly resituates the quest motif as social (inter)action in the outback, thus

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<sup>41</sup> Hogan, "Kim Scott's *True Country*," 108.

addressing identity formation with considerably more subtlety and complexity through performance.<sup>42</sup>

Moreover, in order to create the necessary critical distance for identity formation to be addressed productively, Scott chooses a fictional protagonist for what Richard Pascal has described as his “interesting example of that most inward-looking and distinctive of European fictional modes, the *bildungsroman*.”<sup>43</sup> Mudrooroo similarly comments on the genre of life writing through the fictional character of George in his Vampire trilogy, but this identification between the author and the male protagonist is fleeting. Scott follows more closely in Sally Morgan’s footsteps when reworking his own experiences into text, but the problem of ‘authenticating’ Indigenous experience emphatically forges his instance of life writing as novelistic invention.<sup>44</sup> In assigning a decisive role to fiction in conveying his message, Scott beckons toward a new literary agenda for Indigenous writing: “I like to think that in writing fiction I get a chance to be more true than the truth.”<sup>45</sup> The latter shifts the focus from an emphatic *My Place* as *My Quest* to a communal *True Country* as Indigenous Australia, which “strives to persuade its readers that a viable national community is possible.”<sup>46</sup> Thus, the issue is no longer how not-so-black, suburban professionals can recover their Indigeneity but, instead, how “in the form of its telling, [the novel] suggests something of being claimed by a heritage.”<sup>47</sup> Thus, *True Country* highlights a collective perspective in which it is the land itself that speaks through the text. As Philip Morrissey argues,

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<sup>42</sup> This was not without trouble. In the “struggle to match the English language with a non-verbal sense of self and heritage,” Scott produced a first draft of *True Country* that was heavily influenced by the “conventions of a social realist literary tradition” and the “perspectives offered by [his] formal education and the media,” which did not convince him (Scott, “Strangers at home,” 1–3).

<sup>43</sup> Richard Pascal, “Singing Our Place Little Bit New: Aboriginal Narrativity and Nation Building in Kim Scott’s *True Country*,” in *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 46:1 (Fall 2004): 4.

<sup>44</sup> Scott, *True Country*, 8.

<sup>45</sup> Kunhikrishnan, “Identity Narratives.” See also Chapter 5 below, on Alexis Wright’s fiction.

<sup>46</sup> Pascal, “Singing Our Place Little Bit New,” 6.

<sup>47</sup> Scott, “Strangers at home,” 3.

Like Sally Morgan's *My Place*, Scott's novel is composed of other people's stories but while the stories of Morgan's relatives are subsumed into her quest for truth, *True Country* does not privilege its central character Billy [...] the authorial position is supra-personal, not limited to the perspective of Billy in that it accompanies Billy but does not merge with him. The fact that the text follows Billy but does not describe the community of Karnama and surrounding land solely from his point of view enables Scott to show the importance of land independently of any given subjectivity.<sup>48</sup>

*True Country's* protagonist is therefore Karnama itself, dedicating all its narrative space to assessing the dire situation of its community despite Indigenous "self-determination,"<sup>49</sup> and thus raising urgent questions about what it means to be Indigenous. The fixed geographical location of Karnama offers the possibility of investigating Indigeneity from a variety of perspectives, delivering a polyphonic text with multiple, contrasting points of view: "in *True Country*, a multi-voiced narrative technique underlines the specificity of Scott's story as one emergent Aboriginal voice among other Aboriginal voices."<sup>50</sup> What may confound the Western reader, therefore, are the sudden, multiple shifts in narrative perspective ranging across grammatical person and number, shifts in register as well as sociolect. Unlike the more linear (though not chronological) polyphonic inscription of custodianship in *My Place*, this asks readers to invest considerable intellectual and emotional effort in unpacking the conflicting political agendas behind utterances, whose implications and validity have to be negotiated throughout the text.

The subversive character of Scott's 'plotting' is related to Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia, the net of social and discursive forces in which polyphony is embedded in the construction of the self; Bakhtin situates the tension between one's self-construction and existential position in the world at the point of intersection where

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<sup>48</sup> Morrissey, "Aboriginal Writing," 319.

<sup>49</sup> Scott, *True Country*, 98.

<sup>50</sup> Fielder, "Country and Connections," 1 of 12. Fielder quotes from Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. & tr. Caryl Emerson (1963; Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984): 6.

different discourses meet in the individual.<sup>51</sup> Billy's struggle with conflictive discourses on Indigeneity so as to reach a satisfactory sense of self is heteroglossic; yet, not only Billy but also the novel is such an intersection point of Indigenous and non-Indigenous discourses, and therefore a performative text in search of definitive shape. Therefore, Scott writes, "As I continued to write, the story developed in ways which I had not suspected."<sup>52</sup> Reflecting a country where racial difference continues to be discursively inscribed in all realms of society and where Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia occupy unequal positions of political empowerment, *True Country* projects the difficulty of reaching a *modus vivendi* as a "cacophony" of voices making "an effort to negotiate some useful common ground."<sup>53</sup> This negotiation bears on an Indigenous adaptation of the fictional mode which prioritizes the communal construction, transmission, and reception of narrative through custodianship and the incorporation of the Indigenous sacred into Aboriginal Reality. This reconfiguration of style and content is the most evident formal way in which *True Country* engages with the uncanny, as it alienates the reader from common genres of Western writing and expectations regarding the text's revelation of the 'truth' about Indigeneity.

An important cohesive device in this cacophony is offered by the anonymous communal Indigenous narrative voice, which "upsets the narrative mastery typically possessed by the Western autobiographical subject"<sup>54</sup> and speaks from a transcendental, knowing subject position. Its transcription of Indigenous English may be identified as the Indigenous elders' intervention in key episodes of

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<sup>51</sup> Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist, tr. Caryl Emerson & Michael Holquist (1975; Austin: U of Texas P, 1981): 345.

<sup>52</sup> Scott, *True Country*, 8.

<sup>53</sup> Pascal, "Singing Our Place Little Bit New," 4–5. Note also that the Aboriginal narrator describes the camp as a multi-linguistic Babel: "There's all sorts of language spoken at Karnama. Spanish, Spanish English, Philippine Spanish, Philippine English, aboriginal languages, Aboriginal English, Australian English, Government English, Politician English. And more. Got them all nearly" (Scott, *True Country*, 122).

<sup>54</sup> Hogan, "Kim Scott's *True Country*," 5.

the text with the force of the Law. It punctuates and frames, presenting the novel as a communal effort that sings identity into place by plotting it across the land, and insists on including the reader as much as Billy in the production of relevant meaning. The Indigenous “welcome to you” of the novel’s beginning invites the reader and Billy to participate in a “dialogic model of reading”<sup>55</sup> identity: “We’re gonna make a story, true story. You might find it’s here you belong. A place like this.”<sup>56</sup> This process comes full circle in the “welcome to you” of its conclusion, which highlights the dynamic character of the story achieved: “See? Now it’s done. Now you know. True country [...] We gotta be moving, remembering, singing our place a little bit new, little bit special, all the time.”<sup>57</sup>

For Billy, coming into full knowledge takes place through an uncanny epiphany at the settlement’s river, to which the novel builds up slowly as it casts his experiences and views against those of others. Billy actively tries to negotiate a shared space for the Indigenous and non-Indigenous world based on critical engagement and mutual respect. In Billy, the uncanny obtains as the manifestation of his hidden Indigenous heritage in a slow but inexorable ritual of initiation that defies his initial lack of fit into the local environment through “white explorer narrative”; together with some white suburban professionals, he travels out from the relative security and familiarity of the urban core of mainstream Western Australia, Perth, into its heart of darkness, a “relatively dangerous, unknown liminal space.”<sup>58</sup> While Karnama is presumed to beckon for white civilization’s help in Christian and Enlightenment fashion, it challenges mainstream understandings of Indigeneity—hence, of Australianness. Thus, the Indigenous community ultimately proves elusive and beyond white control, discouraging and scaring away most of the non-Indigenes employed by church and state.

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<sup>55</sup> Van Toorn, “A Journey Out/Back,” 47.

<sup>56</sup> Scott, *True Country*, 13–14.

<sup>57</sup> *True Country*, 255.

<sup>58</sup> “A Journey Out/Back,” 42.

For Westerners, the uncanny obtains because they are up against a situation beyond their understanding. They are 'ghosted'<sup>59</sup> and expelled by a Karnama they are unable to bend into a more acceptable, mainstream perception of home. Thus, the Indigenous narrator concludes: "Some of them see their world slipping slipping the longer they stay, and they struck out before they *marooned* and forgotten."<sup>60</sup> The verb 'to maroon', or to abandon on a deserted coast or island, takes on uncanny connotations in this context, as it refers to the 'Maroons': runaway black slaves in the Caribbean of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These were obviously '*marron*'—dark brown, fugitive, and wild respectively, as the French origin of the word indicates.<sup>61</sup> Thus, the Indigenous voice would seem to suggest that Karnama's lack of 'civilization' could corrupt the white people's 'stable' identities.

Multiple discursive strains therefore confront each other in *True Country's* heteroglossia and interrogate Billy's sense of self, so that his confusion echoes the cacophony of voices that speak out haphazardly from the text. Non-Indigenous voices in *True Country* are mainly imbued with liberal-humanist and/or romantic content. Their racism toward the Indigenous underclass is barely hidden, and their purported effectiveness in terms of social reform, the capitalist mode of production, religion, and romantic escapism is questionable. Indigenous voices reflect the complexity of Indigenous society beyond essentialist definitions of Indigeneity, show a variety of effects by, and attitudes toward, contact with white civilization, and highlight the reasons for Indigenous society's collapse. More the effect of, than the cause of, mainstream intervention in the Indigenous underclass, serious signs of social breakdown are shown in some relationships of the younger mission Indigenes, which strongly map race across gender conflict, involving disrespect of kinship obligations and taboos, domestic violence, and racist

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<sup>59</sup> I refer to Elizabeth Povinelli's use of 'to ghost' as a reference to the Aboriginal sign haunting national self-definition and to the impossibility of its representation as a true essence Chapter (see chapter 2, footnote 120).

<sup>60</sup> Scott, *True Country*, 236 (sic; emphasis added).

<sup>61</sup> "maroon," in *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004; Answers.com, 2008), <http://www.answers.com/topic/maroon> (accessed 17 July 2008).

victimhood. Some of the Indigenous mob manage to develop critical thinking but do not reach the stage of affirmative action. They may be aware of the assimilationist thrust behind mainstream intervention but show serious signs of factual entrapment in alcoholism and family disintegration, and spiritual entrapment between 'primitive' nostalgic romanticism and 'modern' liberal humanism. However, their confusion and potential are put into perspective by the communal Indigenous voice, which avows a strategic, postcolonizing employment of identity politics based on the land as a binding factor: "And we got something to tell. Here first. For a long time. This whole big Australia land binds us. And we fragments of a great ... Dreamt time."<sup>62</sup>

Community elders like Fatima, Walanguh, and Sebastian celebrate a return to tribal ways and wisdom as advocated by the communal voice in the text. Billy's first serious contact with traditional knowledge and Indigenous notions of law and truth is through inscription in the maternal. Fatima is purportedly "the first baby born on the mission" (24), and can therefore tell about the beginnings of the settlement. The description of Fatima's birth in mission journals does not match the story passed on to her, and this faulty 'origin story' starts off a joint project which plots and maps tribal oral narrative over Western written records. Its aim is to lay bare the latter's disturbing gaps and silences regarding mainstream policies of Indigenous extermination, dispossession, and dislocation. Charting this Indigenous past together is problematic because both work from radically different traditions. Billy is reliant on literacy and the written record, whereas Fatima is invested in orality and custodianship; this constitutes a tense discursive space where Billy's tape recorder circulates as the token of cultural exchange. Moreover, these narrative traditions are discursively inscribed in uneven power structures. Although the struggle for shared meaning is hard, the collective tribal voice's invitation to create a story together eventually prevails and success confers an intense sense of empowerment. As Billy observes,

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<sup>62</sup> Scott, *True Country*, 167 (emphasis added). Further page references are in the main text.

I think we were enjoying the re-creation of the story. It is hard to explain this. We were like two demigods perched on a mountain top, or cloud, and the two of us narrating a story, as it was simultaneously performed by the tiny mortals far below us. (37–38)

Toward the end of *True Country*, the notion of passing on an Indigenous oral heritage in textual shape, a hybrid novel, becomes strongest: “You *sing a story* like Walanguh could [...] that’d be a proper *powerful* one. Write about it all here. I’d help you. What you say?” (247).

### Identity and Performance

Wrapped in layers of mystery and secrecy, Walanguh, Fatima’s old and sick husband, represents the hard maban core of the Indigenous universe at the mission. Elusive and uncommunicative, he represents the remnants of a powerful past in a disempowered present:

The old people had a lot of magic in them. They even fly in the air. Sometimes like a balloon, a bird, a snake, even just like themselves [...] Or they sing a song, you know, a magic song. Then a bloke has an accident in a car, or somebody just has to get silly and hit ‘im on the head with a rock and kill ‘im. All this they still use today, people like old Walanguh maybe [...] They still do it today and they try keep getting their culture growing more strong. When they do all this Law stuff, initiation stuff, they get stronger from that too. (67–69)

Billy’s paternal inscription in country takes place in the revelation of his family connections to Walanguh, his grand-uncle by his father’s mother, who was removed from the mission, in an arduous negotiation that spans the whole novel. The required genealogical knowledge is passed on to Billy when Walanguh is about to die, but he is unable to decipher his uncle’s Aboriginal English: “He thought it was something about the river, about Walanguh’s sister or



grandmother, about crossing the river" (147). This miscommunication—an "atrophy [...] of tradition" as Scott calls it<sup>63</sup>—foreshadows his Dreaming experiences of drowning in the river and rebirth in hospital. It also necessarily puts Billy's search for identity within sensorial parameters. The failure of linguistic communication—already encountered in the complications embedded in the storytelling project with Fatima—is an important issue throughout this novel which attempts to make very different literary traditions and realms of experience meet; coming into full tribal knowledge is therefore nonverbally configured on the terrain of D/dreaming.

The text consistently works with metaphors of vertical and horizontal movement to signify freedom and entrapment, life and death. Billy's attacks of vertigo denote his inability to escape from Western discourse and close the gaps in his hybrid identity. Jumping from a tree into the river, as the Indigenous children do, scares him and literally casts him down as the latter connects to a falling-and-drowning nightmare which haunts his childhood and symbolizes his lost sense of self.<sup>64</sup> However, overcoming this fear when rising, floating, and flying marks his access to the Indigenous universe through the Dreaming; the latter is a wholesome merger of the vertical with the spacious broadness of the horizontal plane that connects to an expansive inscription in country.<sup>65</sup> Billy starts out charting the land around Karnama by surveying by airplane, studying maps, and reading mission journals, but he needs actual lived experience "to take him beyond that subject-object relationship."<sup>66</sup> Feelings of elation are connected to small breakthroughs in his identity quest, and marked by a sense of elevation and aerial freedom. Thus, he perceives himself as a demigod "perched on a mountain top, or cloud' and "about to take off, and soar" (40, 44) when 'storying' with Fatima. At the river, he imagines "seeing all this

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<sup>63</sup> Guy, "Kim Scott in Conversation," 13.

<sup>64</sup> *True Country*, 90–91.

<sup>65</sup> See Bill Ashcroft, Francese Devlin-Glass & Lyn McCredden, *Intimate Horizons* (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2009), for the importance of the horizontal in the Aboriginal sacred.

<sup>66</sup> Morrissey, "Aboriginal Writing," 319.

from above, as if you were flying slowly, just drifting, quiet, way above them [...] you are invisible, you cast no shadow" (90).

A point of inflection is achieved when Walanguh's death is foreshadowed in a flying dream of a different kind, as it visually and emotionally communicates Billy's inclusion in the family line and Indigenous community. In this dream, Walanguh appears in ghostly shape, cast between life and death, "drifting through the blue [...] He drifted away and up, going up and up and away [...] Fatima [...] began wailing grief and beating her skull with her fists. And the dogs howled" (40, 44). But despite Walanguh's efforts, Billy is increasingly confounded by the cacophony of conflicting discourses in his surroundings and seeks solace in alcohol and isolation; his connection with Walanguh and sense of self may only be fully (re)established by confronting the ghostly in an initiation ritual.

Death is prefigured by the corpse of the "wise old crocodile" (212), trapped in a fish net which once belonged to the project officer and which was stretched across the river by some of the Indigenes. An expert hunter and survivor, the animal stands for the continuation of the Indigenous tradition itself, but its gruesome death caused by white technology sounds an ominous warning that survival without adaptation is not possible. Billy is also engulfed but regurgitated by the local river after a violent storm has trapped him in a womb-like ceremonial hut from which his Indigenous rebirth will take place: "Caught within this shell, and yet within the roaring wind and rain, he felt a part of it all. Within it, but sheltered and safe" (253). However, in order to reach the safe haven of the Indigenous settlement-cum-Indigenous belonging, Billy is forced to leave this temporary shelter and cross the turbulent river. The river, whose waters have risen dangerously, comes alive as the life-giving rainbow serpent of Indigenous cosmology and devours Billy. Poised between life and death,

Billy knew it as a *snake*. It threw him about at the same time as it wrapped around him, pulling him to it and deeper, stilling his struggles. Then free, he bounced off rocks, gulped air, swallowed water. A second coughing breath. Twisting. Muscles spinning him, holding. Light distant, a circle of light at the end of a long tunnel. It was a *throat*. Quiet, warm, soft darkness. He was swallowed and within. (254)

The light at the end of the tunnel sees life and death ambiguously circulate through each other, shuttling between afterlife and a birth channel. While Billy's and Indigenous culture's demise is suggested, the final scene at the hospital allows for a more complex inscription of identity. Billy may be seen to speak from the nonrepresentative, liminal discursive space in which the postcolonial ghost hovers, rewriting the nation's sense of self. Indeed, Scott himself revealed that "[he] didn't see Billy as dying. [He] saw him as continuing *some kind of* tradition. But a lot of people had seen it as death."<sup>67</sup> It is perhaps emblematic of the vexed perception of contemporary Indigeneity, the enduring ideas on authenticity, and the difficulty entailed in trying to understand tradition as performative and capable of change, that readership has often been wrong-footed by *True Country's* finale.

Unlike the crocodile, Billy goes beyond physical and metaphorical death because he hybridizes two worlds that are often unintelligible but bound to one another. Billy's survival marks the novel's postcolonizing intention to bridge the gap between those worlds beyond the assimilative thrust of the mainstream discourse of Reconciliation. After "black spirits [...] [p]erhaps Fatima, Moses, Samson"<sup>68</sup> retrieve him from the river, Western medicine is unable to turn his drowning experience into a physical and spiritual resurrection. Healing must take place through the active engagement of the Indigenous Dreaming, as already foreshadowed in Beatrice's recovery.<sup>69</sup> Billy's levitated spirit observes his family members, past

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<sup>67</sup> Guy, "Kim Scott in Conversation," 11 (emphasis added).

<sup>68</sup> *True Country*, 254.

<sup>69</sup> Roslyn Brooks writes to this effect that "Scott's writing, uncompromising and grim, has therapeutic functions [...] *True Country*, combining traditional mythology and culture with present-day realism, bridges the gulf between Kim Scott's own diverse cultural heritages. His realistic account, bleak though it is, comes from within the Aboriginal community. It resists taking a victim position of helplessness and dependency and instead points to the need for Aboriginal people to confront the cultural breakdown that underlies illness. *True Country* points a way towards healing through ownership and empowerment"—see Roslyn Brooks, "Therapeutic Narrative: Illness writing and the quest for healing" (doctoral dissertation, University of Sydney, 2004): 206,

and present, gathered around his hospital bed, and joins Walanguh in horizontal flight over Karnama so as to inscribe himself in the land. Unlike his initial vision from the airplane, Billy's flight is now empowering, in that it marks his coming into true knowledge about his origins. Thus, the flattening, surveillant, objectifying male gaze of the land shifts into an empathic three-dimensional embrace of life-giving country:

they're mute and grinning, they're drifting out the window together [...] searching for a place to land [...] *And [Billy] knew who he was, he recognised the land below him.* The river snaking across burnt earth sprouting bits of green, that pool in the bend of the river, the green mission grounds, the cross of the airstrip.<sup>70</sup>

If the disconnection from the physical body and the sensation of levitation and ascent hint at death, the novel recomposes the severed link between the body and the spirit, the real and the ideal, the physical world and the Dreaming, self and other through an Indigenous perspective on the regenerative power of water. As though in answer to the meandering river's life-sustaining capacity, "The rain spat in the window, onto his face. *I felt it.*"<sup>71</sup> Reanimation is underlined in the narrative perspective, which shifts from third to first person singular, relocating subjectivity within Billy, and merging with the collective Indigenous "we" that immediately follows. Thus, Scott's storying plots beyond the static, 'dead' core of Manichean race, gender, and class discourse; the Indigenous voice confirms the complex hybrid dynamics of contemporary identity formation by folding the end of the text into its beginning, and advocates for a reinscription of Indigenous tradition as a postcolonizing, performative process rather than involitional circularity.

While Philip Morrissey rightly claims that "the key to understanding [the novel] lies [...] in a consideration of its formal

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[http://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/bitstream/2123/663/1/adt-NU20050511.17192602 whole.pdf](http://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/bitstream/2123/663/1/adt-NU20050511.17192602%20whole.pdf) (accessed 3 May 2008).

<sup>70</sup> *True Country*, 254.

<sup>71</sup> *True Country*, 255.

structures,"<sup>72</sup> it can be argued that in adapting and rewriting style and genre, *True Country* makes an important contribution to reconciling mutually exclusive notions of Indigeneity and Australianness. On the final count, *True Country* constitutes an ambivalent crossbreed of tabula rasa and palimpsestic discourses which dissolves the distinction between Billy's journeys out/back into one outback. Thus, it re/traces a joint non/Indigenous hi/story whose dark lines may re/appear on the whitened surface of Billy's body, the novel's pages, and the Australian land. In sum, this instance of Aboriginal Reality effectively creates an inclusive meeting ground for linear and nonlinear, oral and written, realist and nonrealist 'storying' traditions in the discursive project of narrating or *singing* the self, community, and nation anew. *True Country* premises such an inscription primarily as an *Indigenous* understanding of country:

See? Now it's done. Now you know. True country. Because just living is going downward lost drifting nowhere, no matter if you be skitter-scatter dancing anykind like mad. We gotta be moving, remembering, singing our place a little bit new, little bit special, all the time. We are serious. We are grinning. Welcome to you.<sup>73</sup>

### ***Benang*, Racial Elevation, and Successful Failure**

*Benang* also addresses the many problems surrounding Indigenous identity formation, but through an investigation of the devastating effects of the official eugenicist politics between the late-nineteenth century and 1970 on the lives of Western Australian Aborigines, focussing on a south-coast Nyoongar mob. These effects perdure, as Kim Scott's understanding of his own, liminal place in society as a very light-skinned Aborigine may show: "I think it's an awkward historical position that I'm in really. It's reconciling the psyche

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<sup>72</sup> Morrissey, "Aboriginal Writing," 319. He does, however, highlight Reconciliation as an "important contextual fram[e]."

<sup>73</sup> *True Country*, 255.

almost."<sup>74</sup> *Benang* also bears semi-autobiographical traces which brilliantly continue Scott's search for family, place, and belonging in *True Country*. As Anita Heiss observes, "the story reflects much of his own family. There is far too much detail, passion and soul in this work to be a book of complete fiction."<sup>75</sup>

The struggle for Indigenous inscription is yet again given shape through fiction, which provides Scott with room to write about his family history in a way that is "far away enough from the truth to be more true than the truth—which is what you can do with art."<sup>76</sup> Thus, he is able to produce an uncommon, ground-breaking instance of Indigenous life writing. The fictionalizing process allows him to carry out a genealogical investigation of his family line over several generations without being exposed to the same harmful effects of public authentication as Sally Morgan suffered; at the same time, it enables him to state a clear, neat message regarding the social-Darwinist policies mainstream Australia wielded against its Indigenous population for most of its contact history. The recovery of the protagonist's Indigenous heritage develops backward along the paternal line of ancestry: the too-soon-to-die hybrid father figure, Thomas; the destructive white paternal grandfather, Ernest Solomon Scat, whose last name harks back to the author's; his mixed-descent uncles Jack and Will; and the founder of the 'dynasty', the 'white' great-great-grandfather Sandy One Mason. However, as the novel's title foreshadows, full Indigenous inscription is only to be achieved by recovering the story of his 'full-blood' Indigenous great-great-grandmother Fanny Benang, legally married to the 'white' sealer Sandy One, which ultimately inscribes the narrative—like Sally Morgan's *My Place*—in a matrilineal solution.

### Story and History: A.O. Neville and Ernest Scat

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<sup>74</sup> Guy, "Kim Scott in Conversation," 11.

<sup>75</sup> Anita Heiss, "New Indigenous Fiction," *Southerly* 22 (December 1999), <http://www.thefree.library.com/New+Indigenous+Fiction-a055426531> (accessed 23 July 2008).

<sup>76</sup> Scott, "What does it mean to be Aboriginal."

The vicissitudes of Harley's family members must be understood in the wider context of southern Western Australia's colonization. As farming, mining, urban settlement, and the road and railway network took over Indigenous land at the turn of the twentieth century, state and national legislation and policies were imposed to justify and ease white occupation of the territory, increasingly writing the Indigenous population out of its traditional place of belonging by dispossession, removal, and extermination. The policies of Indigenous tutelage were epitomized in the overarching, domineering presence of an institutionalized white patriarchal figure, A.O. Neville, Chief Protector of the Aborigines in Western Australia between 1915 and 1940. Thus, *Benang* stages this historical character manipulating and curbing Harley's forebears' lives directly and indirectly with a much higher degree of sophistication than earlier Protectors of the Aborigines such as George Augustus Robinson, whose 'charitable actions' are amply addressed in Mudrooroo's fiction. In *Benang*, Neville's eugenicist ideology of "the gradual absorption of the native Australian black race by the white"<sup>77</sup> is put into practice on the most personal of levels by a far removed fictional cousin modeled on Kim Scott's grandfather, the amateur eugenicist Ernest Solomon Scat, who has emigrated from Scotland to overcome the stifling restrictions of the British class system and carve out a new life for himself on Australian soil.<sup>78</sup>

A.O. Neville was a typical product of a society that saw its own culture as more modern, developed, and powerful than, and thus superior to, the so-called primitive peoples it encountered in its expansive imperialist thrust. Neville was nevertheless acutely aware of the common practice of 'black velvet' in this frontier society peopled by white male settlers with a tendency to relieve themselves

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<sup>77</sup> Kim Scott, *Benang* (1999; New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2003): 7.

<sup>78</sup> Scott says: "Ernest Scat is based upon my real grandfather. He was a bastard of a man, really. And I can remember my dad, who's Nyoongar, saying to me when I moved to the city to go to uni: 'Go and see your grandfather if you don't mind too much. He's a bastard, I know he's an old bastard, he's a lonely old man, he's a mongrel, but he's still you're grandfather'" (Scott, "What does it mean to be Aboriginal").

sexually with Indigenous women.<sup>79</sup> This behavior had produced what Neville termed “a sinister third race”<sup>80</sup> that threatened the neatly defined yet unstable racial boundaries of imperialist ideology—and the privileges of a budding white middle class in Australia. As Lisa Slater argues, Neville proposed a “rational” and therefore “reasonable” solution for what was perceived as a racial disturbance of settler civilization:

He pragmatically contended that miscegenation was a reality of frontier Australia and used the language of crisis—that the Aboriginal population was out of control—and that frontier violence was an inhumane answer [...] Neville, as a man of science and of government, and as a caring Australian, secures his authority to make the ‘half-caste’ an object of white reason by insisting that they are an aberration—a stranger to Western reason—and hence a threat, therefore enabling him to prescribe a cure.<sup>81</sup>

Neville’s recipe engages with eugenics,<sup>82</sup> a pseudo-science inscribed in the far deterministic end of the nature–nurture debate which

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<sup>79</sup> The issue of ‘black velvet’ was difficult to address, but forms the core of Sally Morgan’s *My Place*. Another Aboriginal author to write about female sexuality openly is Ruby Langford Ginibi. Her autobiography *Don’t Take Your Love to Town* (1988) is “unusual in presenting a sexualised self,” while “[a]lmost all the other women writers of Aboriginal autobiography are reticent; their narratives hint at secrets too difficult to tell” according to Carole Ferrier. She adds that the colonial roles for Aboriginal women were either inscribed in the practice of ‘black velvet’—and thus related to sexual availability and promiscuity—or in upholding the moral economy of the family—see Carole Ferrier, “Ruby Langford Ginibi and the Practice of Auto/biography,” in *Approaches to Don’t Take Your Love to Town*, ed. Penny van Toorn (Australian Women’s Studies Resources 1999), [http://www.emsah.uq.edu.au/awsr/Publ\\_Ruby/ruby.htm](http://www.emsah.uq.edu.au/awsr/Publ_Ruby/ruby.htm) (accessed 2 July 2009).

<sup>80</sup> Scott, *Benang*, 31. Scott paraphrases from A.O. Neville’s *Australia’s Coloured Minority: Their Place in Our Community* (Sydney: Currawong, 1947).

<sup>81</sup> Lisa Slater, “Benang, This ‘Most Local of Histories’: Annexing Colonial Records into a World without End,” *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 41.1 (2006): 54–55.

<sup>82</sup> The term was coined by Sir Frances Galton and derives from the Greek *eugenes*, meaning ‘well-born’ or “hereditarily endowed with noble qualities”—see “eugenics,” in *Genetics* (The Gale Group, 2003; Answers.com, 2008), <http://www.answers.com/topic/eugenics> (accessed 11 August 2008); and in *The*



represents a dark foil to Darwin's theory of evolution based on the blind mechanism of natural selection.

Eugenics proposed the belief that the human race could be *consciously* improved by selective breeding. It was developed by Charles Darwin's cousin Sir Frances Galton, who defined it as "the study of agencies under social control that may improve or impair the racial qualities of future generations either physically or mentally." It was also influenced by the work of the Austrian monk Gregor Mendel, who theorized the biological laws of inheritance in plants through dominant and recessive genes. The belief that the social and biological quality of the human race could be directed at will made eugenics a set of beliefs encrypted within a political agenda of white male middle-class supremacy.<sup>83</sup> Thus, it had its greatest impact on Western societies between the late 1900s and the Second World War, ranging from US and European repressive regulations on immigration, marriage, and contraception to the Holocaust.

This monopolizing discursive 'patrix' insisted on "the colonial project of producing a bourgeois nationalism that would serve the Empire rel[ying] on the 'education of desire' and was a site where subjugated bodies and colonial subjects were produced."<sup>84</sup> Hence, this agenda was also successfully exported to white settler nations, where South-African apartheid and the White Australia Policy were notoriously active programs until long after World War Two. *Benang* therefore traces the discursive links between race, class, and gender by highlighting the strategic connections between (pseudo) science, the availability of a disenfranchised Indigenous workforce in the colonial economy, and white male desire for black Indigenous

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*Oxford Companion to the Body* (2001. Oxford UP, 2003; Answers.com 2008), <http://www.answers.com/topic/eugenics> (accessed 11 August 2008).

<sup>83</sup> Interestingly, Darwin had already argued against the idea of race in his *Descent of Man*, published in 1874—see John Gardiner-Garden, "The Definition of Aboriginality," *Department of the Parliamentary Library Research Note 18* (2000–2001), <http://www.aph.gov.au/LIBRARY/pubs/rn/2000-01/01RN18.htm> (accessed 24 January 2009).

<sup>84</sup> Lisa Slater, "Making Strange Men: Resistance and Reconciliation in Kim Scott's *Benang*," in *Resistance and Reconciliation: Writing in the Commonwealth*, ed. Bruce Bennett, Susan Cowan, Jacqueline Lo, Satendra Nandan & Jennifer Webb (Canberra: Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies [ACLALS], 2003): 362.

women. This connection is at the heart of the uncontrolled proliferation of disowned hybrid progeny—a sinister, vampiric third race which battens on unstable racial borders—through the opportunities of abuse occasioned by the Aborigines' disenfranchisement as the colonial underclass. White, male desire in the colonial setting is channeled through the rape of Indigenous women, either living in Indigenous settlements or employed in domestic service, and its procreative results are subsequently exorcized, hidden, and put to work in the capitalist economy through the policy of separation and child removal known as the Stolen Generations.

A.O. Neville implemented his eugenicist ideas using the bases for containment of the Indigenous 'threat' laid out in the 1905 Aboriginal Act, which was the Indigenous equivalent to the 1901 Immigration Restriction Act, also known as the White Australia Policy. Both formed part of a nationalist impulse to forge an all-white Australia with measures that aimed to secure racial boundaries on both the outside and inside of the island continent so as to restrict access to Australia's natural resources to Anglo-Celtic settlers. The 1905 Aboriginal Act produced a binding, legal definition of Indigeneity which would determine Indigenous access to work, services, resources, housing, and land—and would therefore deny them the status of full-fledged Australian citizens:

This definition included Aborigines of full descent, "half-castes" who were defined as persons with an Aboriginal parent or children of such persons, "half-castes" who lived or associated with Aborigines and "half-caste" children under the age of sixteen. Those who wished to apply for exemption had to have a "suitable degree of civilisation". Included in the Act were controls over employment and movement—the latter included the right to restrict movement by establishing segregated Aboriginal reserves—the removal of Aboriginal peoples to these reserves, the ordering of people out of towns and the moving of their camps from any area to another. The Chief Protector had control over the property, earnings and personal life of Aboriginal people. The Act gave the Chief Protector and the Local Protectors the licence to restrict marriages, regulate sexual contact, and to be the legal

guardians of children under sixteen, who were considered the “white man’s child”. The Protector’s powers of guardianship exceeded those of the child’s mother. Aboriginal people could also be arrested without warrants.<sup>85</sup>

In 1936, still under Neville, who had meanwhile become a powerful and determining authority in national Indigenous affairs, this Act was modified to include and control the greatest-possible amount of ‘black velvet’s sinister offspring’. As Anna Haebich points out,

The central clause in the 1936 Act was the definition of persons to be deemed “natives” within the meaning of the Act. It embraced a wide range of Aborigines of part descent in the south who had been exempt from the 1905 Act. Briefly, it included all persons of the full and part descent, regardless of their lifestyle, with the following exceptions: all “quadroons” over the age of twenty-one unless classified as “native” by special magisterial order [...] and persons of less than “quadroon” descent born before 31 January 1936. They were prohibited by law from associating with “natives” regardless of the nature of their relationship.<sup>86</sup>

*Benang’s* fiction is driven by documentary research of government records on the effects of Western Australia’s eugenicist policies and discourse on Scott’s family over the last five generations and describes the perverse and devastating impact of the Act’s binary, exclusivist language on Harley’s (part-)Indigenous ancestors. Dehumanizing the Indigenes, it curbed their possibilities for participation in mainstream society as independent, free, responsible citizens. They were condemned to languishing in Indigenous reserves, participating in the colonial economy as virtual slaves, or passing as whites, all of which threatened to break their resistance

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<sup>85</sup> Slater, “*Benang*, This ‘Most Local of Histories,’” 67, footnote 11. She quotes from Anna Haebich, *Broken Circles: Fragmenting Indigenous Families 1800-2000* (Fremantle, WA: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2001): 216–220.

<sup>86</sup> Quoted in Scott, *Benang*, 151; primary source Anna Haebich, *For Their Own Good: Aborigines and Government in the Southwest of Western Australia, 1900–1940* (Perth: U of Western Australia P, 1988): 349.

and often resulted in traumatic self-hatred, shame, and guilt. As *Benang* records, like “many of [their] neighbours” Harley’s forebears “were [...] attempting to negotiate that ultimatum delivered by the likes of [Harley’s] grandfather: ‘Be a white man or nothing.’”<sup>87</sup> In writing this novel, Kim Scott was greatly concerned with undoing the racist nature of the colonial files dealing with his ancestors. In configuring Harley’s fictional quest, it is Scott’s aim “to tell [the story] using the language of the archives,”

and turning that language back on itself so that a reader becomes aware of a larger world, a larger sensibility that can be contained within such a language [...] mak[ing] space for other ways of thinking about ourselves while still using English.<sup>88</sup>

Thus, *Benang* is an attempt to “defuse or detonate all those nasty ways of thinking about oneself.” By putting himself under scrutiny through his fiction, Scott investigates his hybrid position as a victim of the biological-absorption policies and uses this heteroglossic location to formulate a new language and speaking positions for the great variety of Indigenous life experiences available in Australia.<sup>89</sup>

*Benang* uses the personal records left by Harley’s paternal grandfather, Ern Scat, regarding his eugenicist project to ‘breed the Native out’ by sexually abusing a vast succession of domestic servants who had been removed from their families and would be left pregnant by him. Under the veneer of respectability of a boarding-house for gentlemen hides a brothel-cum-sexual laboratory in which colored maids, “aunties,” and female “business partners” never stop circulating and whitened bodies are generated.<sup>90</sup> Thus, Ern experiments with the legally endorsed eugenicist categories of ‘full blood’, ‘half-caste’, ‘quadroon’, and ‘octoroon’ to indicate the ‘dilution’, ‘absorption and assimilation’ of ‘recessive’ Indigenous by ‘dominant’ white blood which provided the average white Australian settler with

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<sup>87</sup> Scott, *Benang*, 428.

<sup>88</sup> Kunhikrishnan, “Identity Narratives.”

<sup>89</sup> Scott, “What does it mean to be Aboriginal.”

<sup>90</sup> Scott, *Benang*, 17–21.

an 'altruistic' justification for participating in genocide against Indigenes on the personal and local level. The paradigm of racial superiority formed part of helping 'primitives' submit to 'progress' modeled on Western Enlightenment thought and allows Ernest Solomon Scat to leave his genetic mark on Australia and disguise his perverse lust as scientific method. Thus, it is through the racial machinations of Harley's grandfather that *Benang* shifts into the Gothic.

In his obsession with absorbing 'black' blood and creating white offspring by turning white desire into invasive genetic experiment, Ern enacts the colonial vampire.<sup>91</sup> The monstrosity of colonial invasion is revealed in his vampiric need to make the Australian earth rather than European soil his resting place. This is underscored by Ern's unswerving aim to create the first white man born as part of a common colonialist agenda whose (often amateur) historians would carry out through examination of origins on the most local of levels so as "to make whiteness Indigenous—to claim land as birthright."<sup>92</sup> As Scott argues, "To claim the first white man born is a desire to make a fresh start. To begin. To be the noble pioneers creating a society."<sup>93</sup> Under the protection of Neville, who intellectually and legally fathers his fictional cousin's vampiric transformation, Ern's invasion of the Australian Body uses sexual penetration as the means to control, recreate, and 'whiten' the Indigenous environment to his own advantage. This perverse desire for control is played out chiefly on his grandson Harley, the target of his pro/creative effort at whitewashing: "I stared at the wall as he thrust, in his stilted way, trying to get deeper within me, and if that was not violation enough, wanting to remain there even as he shrivelled."<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> The racial obsession with the 'purity' of the blood underlying the Victorian invention of the vampire is discussed in Chapter 1.

<sup>92</sup> Hilary Emmett, "Rhizomatic Kinship in Kim Scott's *Benang*," *Westerly* 52 (November 2005): 177.

<sup>93</sup> Kim Scott, "Australia's Continuing Neurosis: Identity, Race and History," in *The Alfred Deakin Lectures: Building the Nation, Embracing the World* (Radio National 15 May 2001), <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/deakin/stories/s291485.htm> (accessed 9 March 2008).

<sup>94</sup> Scott, *Benang*, 80. Further page references are in the main text.

Ern's eugenic "rationalisation of his desire" (34) has made Harley "castrated, *absorbed*, bugged-up, striving to be more than a full stop, to sabotage my grandfather's social experiment, to repopulate his family history" (451) against its whitewashed consequences.

Thus, the beginning of *Benang* conjures up *True Country's* writer's block—the image of the narrator/author facing the blank page and struggling with next to no material to write himself out of "the first-born-successfully-white-man-in-the-family-line" (13) and thus into a space that is not determined by white, racist discourse. In *Benang*, however, the tabula rasa of the blank page immediately reveals a disturbing white charge of colonialist meaning which prevents an Indigenous retracing of the textscape; colonial discourse constructed the Australian geography as a *terra nullius*, empty of prior human habitation and therefore meaningless, and thus refused Indigenes an authoritative speaking position from which to participate in constructing the Australian nation and identity. It is precisely in sucking dry and decoloring a land- and textscape pregnant with Indigenous meaning that "Ern and his contemporaries' style of writing is a form of thinking that rehearses *terra nullius*."<sup>95</sup> And this vampiric claim on the whitened surface debilitates Harley's capacity to create an alternative (hi)story and identity.

Thus, the protagonist-narrator can only rely on a tenuous, marginal speaking position from which to embark on the enterprise of uncovering the colonial palimpsest and re/discovering an Indigenous inscription of his life. It is only by fleshing out his ghostly paleness into a liminal form of Indigeneity that the embarrassment and discomfort his presence causes becomes productive.<sup>96</sup> A near-fatal accident announces his spectral return:

I had come back from the dead [...] it was as my grandfather's child that I sensed an opportunity. The old man wouldn't last long. Well, I've been raised to this, I thought. *It is survival of the fittest, and let the fittest do their best.* (16)

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<sup>95</sup> Slater, "Benang, This 'Most Local of Histories,'" 61.

<sup>96</sup> Scott, *Benang*, 9. Further page references are in the main text.

Harley's discursive meddling with the language of eugenics turns the racist nature of Ern's files to the advantage of an obscured Indigenous heritage, so that his success as a human individual shall be his failure as a white man:

Raised to carry on one heritage, and ignore another, I found myself wishing to reverse that upbringing, not only for the sake of my own children, but also for my ancestors, and for their children in turn. And therefore, inevitably, most especially, for myself. (21; see also 12, 31, 351)

### **Racial Elevation and Identitarian Flight: The Matrilineal and Patrilineal**

The novel starts out with Harley's sense of self unfixed, literally floating after the car accident in which his father, Tommy Scat, is killed and for whose death he feels responsible. Tommy is the result of Ern's raping his adopted daughter and surrogate wife Topsy, who is the illegitimate offspring of his 'octoroon' ex-wife Kathleen Coolman and the white local police officer, Sergeant Hall. Ern had 'genetically programmed' Tommy to be white but he fails the test by the arbitrary relocation of the legal binary in the 1936 Act that amplifies the definition of Indigeneity (367). The elusive artificiality of this legally inscribed racial boundary determines Tommy's vexed, rebellious nature; thus, Harley is the oedipal fruit of an affair between Tommy and one of Ern's domestic servants-cum-sexual slaves, Ellen.<sup>97</sup> After an incident in which a part-Indigenous baby drowns but the seven-year-old Harley is saved by his father, Tommy is forced to give his son into Ern's custody, who sees a last chance to fulfill his eugenicist project. Ern conceives of Harley's conversion to whiteness as sexual conquest, and the fetishistic, incestuous wish to literally "fuck [him]

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<sup>97</sup> As befits a story about uncontrolled reproduction, this is one of the many Ellens circulating through the text, just as there are several Topsies and Fannies. Note these are names for women, whose identities often remain mysterious and hidden in *Benang*. Also note how Tommy's vexed sense of identity emulates Kim Scott's father's.

white"<sup>98</sup> thus reproduces the sexual abuse he inflicted upon Tommy. This inscribes their homosexual triangle in a racist attempt to write out the mother figure because it expels the Indigenous female as an expendable reproductive station.

Ern's monstrous experiment also aims for the first 'white' man rather than woman, and as such reproduces the misogynist prejudices of the Christian origin myth of Adam and Eve. Therefore, in this economy of white, male desire and reproduction, the blame for the proliferation of mixed offspring is never located in white male lust but in black female perversion, as seen in the official qualification of "notorious prostitute" for Harley's Indigenous great-great-grandmother, Fanny Benang.<sup>99</sup> The corollary is that child removal can be justified on the ground of gender to undercut the promiscuous disruption provoked by hybridity in a racially organized society, in the intent to whitewash colored offspring and maintain artificial racial borders. Ern's project appeals particularly to the uncanny because of its expulsion of dark mothers and the sexual abuse of its pale offspring in a manner that harks back to Amelia's vampiric consumption of semen as "white blood."<sup>100</sup> Thus, Harley realizes that "My grandfather was observing me in such a way—scientific he would have said; lecherous, say I—that it was impossible for me to feel at ease."<sup>101</sup>

Harley's manifest dis-ease indicates the extent to which patriarchal inscription is disenfranchised in *Benang*. It is, for instance, not clear whether Harley is Ern's or Tommy's child by Ellen. The hierarchical biological model is not only troubled by this possibility of incest but also by the confused placing of Topsy, Tommy's mother, on the family tree. Furthermore, a series of unacknowledged children—often unnamed or provided with identical names—circulate through the genealogical picture. Lastly, eugenic terminology blatantly fails to capture kinship relations adequately, as another whitewashing vampire, the Travelling Inspector of Aborigines, is incapable of pinpointing Fanny and Sandy One Mason's racial inscription.<sup>102</sup> The

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<sup>98</sup> Scott, *Benang*, 29.

<sup>99</sup> *Benang*, 106.

<sup>100</sup> Mudrooroo, *The Undying* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1998): 68, 148.

<sup>101</sup> Scott, *Benang*, 26.

<sup>102</sup> *Benang*, 488.



end result is one of “profound genealogical bewilderment,”<sup>103</sup> and ultimately, Harley’s alternative, dehierarchized inscription of identity must converge on Sally Morgan’s, becoming eminently matriarchal. Neither in *My Place* nor in *Benang* is there place for the white father’s guilt, so that Harley concludes: “My true ancestors” are “those of my blood-and-land-line, the women I must call Harriette and Fanny.”<sup>104</sup>

This move from the paternal to the maternal means that *Benang* increasingly concentrates on a configuration of identity through the land rather than blood, which announces a move from settler nightmare to Aboriginal Dreaming. Thus, *Benang*’s agenda is fueled by Harley’s desire to inscribe an Australian Garden of Eden that rewrites the colonial account of the (Ab)Original Sin and recovers the benign/benang Indigenous female root. Transforming the snaky, vampiric rendering of the white penis into the textual body of the life-giving Rainbow Serpent Dreaming, Harley produces an alternative origin story, a “shifty, snaking narrative” (24) that necessarily writes itself out of a destructive oedipal text into a regenerative reading of the Indigenous land. As the car accident in which Tommy dies is born of a quarrel over Harley’s custody, the Freudian thrust of Harley’s concomitant guilt complex determines the extent to which he feels disempowered and dislocated. Literally uprooted and enacting the eugenicist motto of “*Uplift[ing] a despised race*” (29), Harley finds himself floating above his bed when awaking in hospital, exposed “to a terrible pressure, particularly upon my nose and forehead,”

and [I] thought I was blind. In fact, the truth was there was nothing to see, except—right in front of my eyes—a whiteness which was surface only, with no depth, and very little variation. Eventually, I realised my face was pressed hard against a ceiling. (13)

With this oppressive physical barrier curbing Harley’s ability to levitate and fly, *Benang* rewrites the empowering ending of *True Country* from a much rawer perspective; rather than inscribing a full sense of identity after near-death, this is mostly lost. While the

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<sup>103</sup> Emmett, “Rhizomatic Kinship in Kim Scott’s *Benang*,” 181.

<sup>104</sup> Scott, *Benang*, 51. Further page references are in the main text.

ceiling's whiteness echoes the color of his skin, its artificial, uninterrupted flatness and thinness also work as metaphors for the tenuousness of Harley's white identity inscribed on his "blank, colonized mind."<sup>105</sup> What is more, they emulate the insubstantial whiteness of blank sheets of paper—an alternative colonial history ambiguously un/written which his impotent pen is initially unable to rewrite.

Harley's recovery starts by grounding his narrative in the sadly lost paternal figure: "It was easy enough to come down again [...] through what I now realise was the thinnest of narratives, my father's few words,"<sup>106</sup> which spoke of Indigenous pride. Harley's weightlessness is instrumental in this process, as it not only denotes unsettledness but also the freedom to connect the multiple paternal and maternal promiscuities embedded in his ancestry. His shamanic capacity for flight enables him to configure his genealogical uprootedness into "a place to land,"<sup>107</sup> and turn the colonial language of racial elevation against itself. Scott's awareness of the limitations of Western language and discourse are adumbrated by John Fielder:

The ironic and 'magic realist' elements of *Benang* function to deal with the past in ways that push the boundaries of predominantly social-realist reading formations [...] Scott [...] looks for ways to rupture the limitations of this dominant form of western storytelling. Testing these textual boundaries, Scott pushes A.O. Neville's assimilationist logic to the limit. Rather than simply blaming individuals, however, it is the cultural logic of colonialism, capitalism and cultural condescension that the text satirises.<sup>108</sup>

*Benang* spells out in great detail how eugenicist language fails to capture and fix the complexities and realities of hybrid kinship relations, which is what initially befuddles Harley in his search. Harley's genealogy is wildly confusing and riddled with the silences,

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<sup>105</sup> Slater, "Benang, This 'Most Local of Histories,'" 58.

<sup>106</sup> Scott, *Benang*, 15.

<sup>107</sup> Scott, *True Country*, 254.

<sup>108</sup> Fielder, "Country and Connections," 6 of 12.

gaps, and classificatory inaccuracies imposed by Western discourse, which "ignore the range of hues."<sup>109</sup> It is when Harley taps into the life of Fanny Benang that the oedipalized white patriarchal script is definitively overturned.

Fanny is married to the 'octoroon' Sandy One Mason, whom she instructs in Indigenous responsiveness to the landscape. In order to survive, she negotiates a space for a hybrid Indigenous identity whose active, creative, and desiring subjectivity is in defiance of "the eugenicists who imagine the black, female body as a silent surface for whiteness to utilize for the purpose of metamorphosis."<sup>110</sup> In reciprocity to Fanny's regenerative, promiscuous understanding of identity, Harley attempts to shape-shift the white skin of Australia's textscape back into Indigenous territory:

I know that Sandy One Mason was glad to have Fanny Pinyan Benang Wonyin with him and glad to return to country rather than remain forever floating upon the sea's skin. It was never just wandering, it was never wilderness. I think it was more like my own wondering, even as I made way through my grandfather's papers, looking for traces, for essences, for some feeling of what happened, for what had shaped it this way. Fanny led her family through a terrain in which she recognised the trace of her own ancestors, and looked for her people. She brought them back. I would like to think that I do a similar thing.<sup>111</sup>

But Harley's walkabout is also textual.<sup>112</sup> Ern's eugenic files reveal disturbing connections to a hidden Indigenous past and plunge

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<sup>109</sup> Scott, *Benang*, 86.

<sup>110</sup> Lisa Slater, "Kim Scott's *Benang*: Monstrous (Textual) Bodies," *Southerly* 65.1 (2005): 70.

<sup>111</sup> Scott, *Benang*, 473–474.

<sup>112</sup> "walkabout," in *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004; Answers.com 2008), <http://www.answers.com/topic/walkabout> (accessed 15 October 2009). A walkabout is a "temporary return to traditional Aboriginal life, taken especially between periods of work or residence in modern society and usually involving a period of travel through the bush."

Harley into a serious identity crisis, upon which his part-Indigenous uncles Jack and Will take action:

Yeah, well this is just to make you sad, reading and looking at [photos] like this. It's just a wadjela way of thinking, this is. You should just relax, feel it. You gotta go right back, ask your spirits for help.<sup>113</sup>

In order to “unsettl[e] the binary of coloniser and colonised,”<sup>114</sup> Harley needs a lived, felt experience of place, kinship and past, so they embark, with the now paralyzed, silenced Ern, upon a journey through their Indigenous ancestors’ country. As Scott says,

when the Nyoongar uncles come into the story, that’s the beginning of Harley’s connection with people and with place. That gives him the big spirit, the big heart, it’s what lets him be compassionate. It’s about including those so-called white ways of thinking in a bigger consciousness.”<sup>115</sup>

This walkabout, which geographically and narratively plots the haphazard, oblique development of *Benang*’s storyline, is inscribed in Harley’s struggle to move beyond the fixities of Western language and categories, and pushes *Benang*’s associative ‘storying’ to the limits of narrative structure and metaphor. The liminal site from which Harley manages to tell his postcolonizing story is that of the haunting ghost—“I realised that I had come back from the dead [...] I may well be djanak, or djangha.”<sup>116</sup>

Harley’s final transformation into a shaman with a disquieting capacity for singing the spirit of the land shows the extent to which he has outdone his father, a failed “deadly singer” who S/scattered his discomfiting identity between “his skin [that] was black and his heart [that] was white.”<sup>117</sup> Once reconnected to country and its

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<sup>113</sup> Scott, *Benang*, 113. *Wadjela* is Nyoongar for ‘white’.

<sup>114</sup> Slater, “*Benang*, This ‘Most Local of Histories,’” 368.

<sup>115</sup> Scott, “What does it mean to be Aboriginal.”

<sup>116</sup> The Nyoongar word *djanak* or *djangha* means ‘maban’ or shaman.

<sup>117</sup> Scott, *Benang*, 425–426: “deadly” means ‘great’ in Aboriginal English, but the qualifier acquires an uncanny connotation in this context.

Dreaming through a multiplicity of kinship links, Harley's hybrid identity is mirrored in his capacity to shape-shift into totemic avian form, hovering in the uncanny realm between life and death:

I looked at my children, and—oh, this was sudden, not at all a gradual or patient uplift—I was the one poised, balanced, hovering on shifting currents and—looking down upon my family approaching from across the vast distances my vision would cover—I was *the one to show them where and who we are*. Uplifted, I was as I have always been; must be. From me came that long cry which has made so many shiver, and think of death [...] it is terrifying. Uncomfortable. It is the sort of thing it is easier to avoid [...] [Uncle Jack] and the women began encouraging friends and family to visit us. We lit a fire, and people would make themselves comfortable, and I would walk in that strange way I have to the fire, float above it, and [...] sing.<sup>118</sup>

### Horizontality and Verticality: Trunks and Roots

In this alternative, hybrid model of genealogy, Harley's ancestry is not so much organized chronologically and hierarchically (in the "sharply ruled diagrams"<sup>119</sup> of his white grandfather's eugenic project) as diffused multidimensionally, according to an Indigenous understanding of kinship that integrates the multiple 'illegitimate' incursions denied by settler genealogy. Harley manages to draw strength from the categorical fuzziness of this confusing hybrid proliferation. As Hillary Emmett writes, "Interrelatedness ceases to be an object of guilt, ridicule and denigration [...] and becomes a source of sexual and emotional fulfillment." The kinship model that arises out of *Benang's* genealogical connections is "relational and continuous," favors a collective politics, and "offers a relatedness which is enacted through storytelling."<sup>120</sup> Thus, the officially-

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<sup>118</sup> *Benang*, 456–457 (emphasis added).

<sup>119</sup> *Benang*, 29.

<sup>120</sup> Emmett, "Rhizomatic Kinship in Kim Scott's *Benang*," 181–182.

sanctioned, patriarchal-hierarchical tree diagram is supplanted by the underground resistance, promiscuous survival, and lateral growth of the rhizome.

The rhizomatic model represents the reproductive capacity of some roots to produce viable offshoots from any underground position, thus allowing plant life to resist and propagate, independent of fertilization. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari take the qualities of the rhizome as the basis for a nonhierarchical interpretation of theory and research with multiple points of entry; it opposes itself to the arborescent conception of knowledge that relies on binary categories and choices in a vertical linear model, common in traditional Western science. A rhizomatic model, by contrast, works with horizontal and trans-species connections,<sup>121</sup> thereby harboring subversive qualities resistant to hierarchical narratives of cause and effect. Thus, Hillary Emmett argues that the network Scott's protagonist weaves has no clear demarcations when it comes to generations, either diachronically or synchronically; there is no clear beginning or end to reproduction and proliferation, so that "Harley's quest [...] produces an account of history which is rhizomatic, contingent, and multiple rather than linear, determined, and singular."<sup>122</sup>

In *Benang*, this alternative model of connectedness through native trees marks a deep resistance to white invasion from the hidden level of the roots, which becomes an Indigenous landscape feature whose connectedness with the presence of water links to the source of life and survival itself. Rootedness signifies connectedness to country, the founding element of the Indigenous universe. The Indigenous gum tree, a member of the eucalyptus family with a hybrid reproduction system of seeding and resprouting, offers a place of shelter for adults, a site of learning and play for future generations, and a healing encounter with nature. It greatly upsets Ern, however, who discerns the eucalypt as a threat to the very structure of settler society:

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<sup>121</sup> Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, tr. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis & London: U of Minnesota P, 1987): 21.

<sup>122</sup> Emmett, "Rhizomatic Kinship in Kim Scott's *Benang*," 178.

This tree by my window, where the children climb, once again casts cool shade and lets the winds whisper in its leaves. It is a tall and pale gum. One of those whose bark peels and falls in strips. It towers over the house and Grandad believed its roots threatened the foundations. He was right in that, they have cracked one wall. Grandad wrote: Cut down the tree. Burn it, dig out its roots. He might also have written: *Displace, disperse, dismiss* [...] My friends, you recognise the language.<sup>123</sup>

Ern's fear echoes a general settler concern with the perceived hostility of Australian nature, exemplified in Scott's anecdote of the Balga tree which changes into a disturbing threat to be exorcized: "we see this [Blackboy] tree and we think it's a blackfella. We think its [*sic*] a native standing there watching us. And we get frightened."<sup>124</sup> Ern's aversion to the thriving trees links up with the invisibility and resistance of a world beyond the colonizer's control, which in its life-giving connection to underground water contains a tenacious native potential for survival. When he is offered a sip from an uncovered tree root near a waterhole to quench his thirst, "Ern knew it was the coolest, the clearest, the purest water he had ever tasted. But he couldn't savour it. It seemed somehow tainted"<sup>125</sup> by what one may assume to be otherness.

The Indigenous Elder Paddy Roe elaborates a rhizomatic distinction between a deep and surface meaning of the land as underneath and on the ground, and relates this to the accessible-public-profane and the taboo-secret-sacred:

the top soil is belongs ANYbody can walk—walk around,  
camp, Anywhere, we can't tell-im he got no right to be there—

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<sup>123</sup> Scott, *Benang*, 109–110. This description matches the stringybark, a member of the eucalyptus species.

<sup>124</sup> Buck, "Trees that Belong Here." White settlers often believed Balgas resembled Aborigines holding an upright spear, because of the shape of the tree trunk and its grassy cups. As the term 'Blackboy' is considered offensive nowadays, the name 'Grasstree' is preferred.

<sup>125</sup> Scott, *Benang*, 129.

if he got right to camp because the top soil is belongs to him—  
but the bottom, the bottom soil, the bottom soil that is belongs  
to my family, family trustees, family group—family trustees.<sup>126</sup>

In this conception, subversive resistance to the omnipresence of white invasion of the land is enabled by the latter's superficiality, which may be likened to the blank thinness of the white narrative detected in Harley's first levitation in hospital. Thus, Harley writes "with the resentment which those I will call my people felt, still feel"<sup>127</sup> when he depicts their dispossession caused by white expansion into the coastal outposts of Western Australia. But eventually, as white civilization lacks proper roots in the land, as it cannot really 'puncture' Australian soil, reach its depths, and hold on to complete its vampiric thrust, it folds back onto itself and contracts like a superficial "small scar in the earth,"<sup>128</sup> where Indigenous culture and narrative resist. Once exploitative techniques converted the land into an inhospitable desert, "The miners [...] left, the farmers left [...] The railway line [...] shrivell[ed] back to some centre [...] but there was always, somewhere, some tight and curling *bush*, and still-secret *waterholes*"<sup>129</sup> signaling the survival of country. This leads Hillary Emmett to the view that rhizomatic resistance of the Indigenous element interlocks and reorganizes space, time, and narrative into new form in *Benang*,

which models the 'deterritorialised' [...] whereby authors writing from within a dominant, state-sanctioned language and culture 'reterritorialise' and transform that language into one that mounts a challenge to the original.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Quoted in Ken Gelder & Jane Jacobs, *Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity in a Postcolonial Nation* (Melbourne: Melbourne UP, 1998): 107, quoted in Stephen Muecke, *Textual Spaces: Aboriginality and Cultural Studies* (Kensington: New South Wales UP, 1992): 104.

<sup>127</sup> Scott, *Benang*, 324–326.

<sup>128</sup> *Benang*, 46.

<sup>129</sup> *Benang*, 118 (emphasis added).

<sup>130</sup> Emmett, "Rhizomatic Kinship in Kim Scott's *Benang*," 176.



Underground resistance to the imposition of artificial racial-colonial boundaries opens up a liminal space from which the hybrid subaltern may speak. This creates a disruptive narrative style that does not obey linear progress of cause and effect and single-focus objective prose—what we may call the white “demands of Historical Fiction.”<sup>131</sup> It is in “confusing things, not following an appropriate sequence”<sup>132</sup> and employing a “clumsy narrative”<sup>133</sup> that Harley wilfully estranges mainstream readers from the characteristics of the traditional novel, and finds the gaps from which an alternative Indigenous narrative may develop.

Thus, Harley's ‘storying’ or ‘singing’ obliquely sneaks/snakes through seemingly random polyphony, poetic association, metaphor, and flash-forward and backward; it holds the reader in check with intentionally confusing secrets and revelations that defy straightforward notions of family belonging. Pablo Armellino accordingly argues that Scott, “in typical postmodern fashion, constructs his narrative by jumping back and forth in time,” whose “systematic disrespect for chronology stands [...] as a symbolic re-framing of the idea of time and evolution” which had subjugated Aborigines to a “fossilized Neolithic culture.”<sup>134</sup> Scott's micronarrative of ‘the most local of histories’ therefore turns from a deceptively straight, ‘simple’ account of ‘authentic’ whiteness into a disturbingly promiscuous family history. It is this rhizomatic account that defamiliarizes the connection of the reader with mainstream notions of home, removing them from an Australianness inscribed in an ‘original’, legitimate white, male, middle-class genealogy of ownership and belonging.

Harley maintains a significant amount of secrecy toward the identity of his first, ‘blackfella’ girlfriends, who set him out on his identity search, bear him children, connect him back to his traditional land and kin, and give him his writing/singing voice:

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<sup>131</sup> *Benang*, 324–326.

<sup>132</sup> *Benang*, 99.

<sup>133</sup> *Benang*, 167.

<sup>134</sup> Pablo Armellino, “Australia Re-Mapped and Con-Texted in Kim Scott's *Benang*,” in *The Pain of Unbelonging*, ed. Sheila Collingwood-Whittick (Cross/Cultures 91; Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2007): 26.

They did not want to be central in such a story, which they understood must be about place, and what had grown from it. "Not us," they said. "Not yet. Our children, yes, but not us." [...] I wanted to make something of which both my children and ancestors can be proud.<sup>135</sup>

Secrecy is a sensible measure to protect the profoundly abused female side of his family group, and a refusal to appropriate a set of experiences Harley may not feel empowered and authorized to understand or reveal. This inscribes *Benang* in an Indigenous tradition of storytelling where the principle of custody is paramount, defying the mainstream misappropriation of Indigeneity for self-interested purposes: "That's [...] why it is told from a male point of view, where I hope that it would be respectful of those older Noongyar [sic] women but it doesn't enter into their consciousness."<sup>136</sup> For Scott, secrecy and being on guard go hand in hand: "We have always been surrounded by others. Needed to communicate with them, and yet be wary and watchful."<sup>137</sup> This statement evokes the multicultural predicament which has allowed for defamiliarizing Indigenous speaking positions and undead Indigenous corpses/ghosts to haunt Australia's geography. Thus, the polyphony of Harley's hybrid family speaks of Indigenous dispossession, displacement, disruption, and extermination on *Benang's* pages in life writing that "celebrates the transmutation of individual experience into universal knowledge and thus the evolution of autobiography into a type of narrative that [...] stands for entire people,"<sup>138</sup> an epic mode also employed in Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*. Scott's Indigenous epic is a powerful fiction of community and counternarrative to the white nation's official version of history which mirrors the position of the author and many of his kin in society; Scott's family unsettle binary conceptions of Indigeneity through their very existence as white-skinned Aborigines whose black-on-white print develops in a grey area of hybridity.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Scott, *Benang*, 451–452.

<sup>136</sup> Buck, "Trees that Belong Here." With *Taboo* (2017) Scott now takes that step.

<sup>137</sup> Scott, *Benang*, 474.

<sup>138</sup> Armellino, "Australia Re-Mapped," 19.

<sup>139</sup> Scott's aunt/*kayang* Hazel Brown comes to mind.

### Ghosts and Shamans: Dream/ing and Nightmare

Harley's uncanny condition as a haunting ghost is partially determined, partially reinforced by the fact that he speaks from an existing location connected to Scott's family conditioned by its grueling genocidal past. *Benang's* first epigraph frames the novel in the geographical context of Ravensthorpe, a small town 550 km southeast of Perth and 40 km inland from the south coast of Western Australia. The area was prosperous at the turn of the twentieth century with gold and copper mining but went into decline during the First World War, and was connected to Hopetoun (Ravensthorpe's port on the coast) by one of the isolated branches of the Western Australian Government Railways. As A. Eades and P. Roberts explain in their submission to Paul Seaman's *Aboriginal Land Inquiry*,

Many Nyungars today speak with deep feeling about this wild, windswept country. They tell stories about the old folk they lost in [a] massacre and recall how their mothers warned them to stay out of that area. One man describes how Nyungars will roll up their car windows while passing through Ravensthorpe, and not even stop for food or petrol. The whole region has bad associations and an unwelcoming aura for them. It is a place for ghosts, not for living people.<sup>140</sup>

As Scott explains in *Kayang and Me*, his family is closely connected to Ravensthorpe and intimately involved in the gruesome episode of frontier violence that took place in 1880, known as the Cocanarup massacre.<sup>141</sup> A further link with the novel is revealed by one of

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<sup>140</sup>Quoted in Scott, *Benang*, 7. Commissioner Paul Seaman's official report *The Aboriginal Land Inquiry* was published in Perth in 1984 and looked into Western Australian Native Title issues.

<sup>141</sup>Scott & Brown, *Kayang and Me*, 18. An article in the ABC News Online of 22 March 2007 highlights how these wounds of the past have still not healed among the Aboriginal families whose ancestors were massacred at Ravensthorpe—see "Indigenous massacre report aims to heal old wounds," in *ABC News* (22 March

*Kayang's* hand-drawn local maps, which shows the coastal areas of Mason's Bay and Fanny Cove, evoking the fictional founders of Harley's family and their connection to the sea.

In *Benang*, Ravensthorpe is represented by the fictional location of Gebalup, in which a revenge party against the local Aborigines perpetrates a massive killing that far exceeds the official police permission to take the lives of eighteen Indigenes. Yet, the massacre is contextualized as a reprise of previous colonial violence against Harley's forebears, to which these merely reacted; Fanny Benang liberates her father Wonyin, whom she finds dog-chained at the local homestead of the Mustles, the upcoming white 'landed gentry' of the area.<sup>142</sup> Before running off, Wonyin retaliates for the violence and humiliation suffered by killing one of the Mustles with an axe. The consequence of the resulting massacre, which affects a host of Indigenous mobs gathered in the area for corroborees, is that his "family left and did not return for many years. It was such a sorry place." Eades and Roberts' words are conveniently echoed in *Benang*: "most Nyoongars still won't come here, just wind up the windows and drive right through Gebalup."<sup>143</sup>

Thus, Gebalup becomes 'death country', a disturbing "death place" devoid of the Indigenous fringe dwellers that "always threatened to spill over their boundaries. Threatened to unsettle, to intrude."<sup>144</sup> The lack of an Indigenous workforce, ironically enough, affects the local economy negatively but does offer a niche of subsistence to Sandy One, intent upon passing as white. Nevertheless, the tightening of the racial barrier strangles his family's possibilities for survival, and allows Ern's eugenic-vampiric meddling with the family's progeny; thus, the matrilineal promise encapsulated in Fanny's surname, a Nyoongar reference to the future, threatens to become associated with Indigenous death. Scott himself explains to this effect:

The novel's title—*Benang*—is a Noongar word meaning 'tomorrow'. It was also one of the spellings given to the name

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2007), <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2007-03-22/indigenous-massacre-report-aims-to-heal-old-wounds/2222848> (accessed 8 October 2009).

<sup>142</sup> Scott, *Benang*, 173–177.

<sup>143</sup> *Benang*, 175–177.

<sup>144</sup> *Benang*, 325, 119.

of an ancestor of mine. With one lonely word I hoped to join a past to a possible future.<sup>145</sup>

The association of Gebalup with death and sickness country is profound. The lives of Fanny Benang, Sandy One Mason, and their family are precariously inscribed in the budding white economy, which imposes itself on the land's possibilities for Indigenous sustenance by stripping it of native game and vegetation:

A world gone? Changed. The telegraph line, railway line, wheel tracks everywhere. Rubbish and bad smells. Trees gone, grass grazed to the ground, the earth cut, shifting, not healed and not yet sealed; vegetation left too long without flames and regeneration. Dust coated the leaves. So many places seemed empty or had new inhabitants. Fanny and the two Sandies once dined on cat, a descendant of a crate of animals dumped inland and expected to feed on the pioneering rabbits. There were plenty of rabbits now. Cats too. Her people huddle in groups, dressed in the rags of white people. They held out their hands to strangers, and were herded about like sheep or cattle, though less well fed.<sup>146</sup>

As the surrounding land is destroyed, the resulting economic contraction and impoverishment of the town becomes an indication of the area's diseased condition of stasis and death. Gebalup metamorphoses literally and figuratively into a ghost town, a place only for, and occupied by, specters whose paleness the Indigenous traditionally associate with white people.

Whiteness is increasingly silenced and obliterated in this ill-fated environment. Ern Scat chooses Gebalup as the site from which to carry out his eugenicist project, but loses control over his limbs and speech after a devastating stroke. The white Coolman twins, local farmers and businessmen, are married into the Benang family but come to ignominious ends: Daniel Coolman, one of Harley's forebears, who marries Fanny Benang's daughter Harriette and

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<sup>145</sup> Scott, "Strangers at home," 5.

<sup>146</sup> Scott, *Benang*, 480–481. Further page references are in the main text.

fathers his uncles Jack and Will, develops a serious speech impediment due to lip cancer, lives in a terribly bloated body, and is eventually killed in rage by his illegitimate son Jack (85);<sup>147</sup> the unreliable Patrick Coolman consorts with Harriette's sister Dinah, and perishes on the beach in a devastating storm. Sandy One Mason tries to pass into white society but is silenced, punished, and paralyzed for this betrayal by tongue cancer. Tommy Scat marries a white woman and forsakes his Indigenous son and heritage in an attempt to pass, which leads to the ill-fated car crash that forever silences his singing potential. Only Harley is returned from 'death country' and manages to find his own voice on a health-restoring, reconciliatory walkabout out of this doomed site of sin.

Gebalup's condition as ghost country also reflects the islands beyond Wirlup Haven; it echoes the sea-bound origin of white colonization, in which boats filled with white 'ghosts' were perceived as parts of these islands come loose. Thus, the islands are intimately associated with destruction, and Fanny reveals that white settlers "used to take our people out there [...] They took people out to the islands and left them. They were places of the dead. Some of our spirit is out there now" (263). Her father, Wonyin, is condemned to exile there and his island jail is intentionally burnt down by white settlers, destroying most of its life (470–471). Moreover, Sandy One is born on one of the islands after his Nyoongar mother is abducted and raped by a white sealer, linking the origins of Harley's family to these ill-fated sites. Thus, the islands become an ominous Gothic symbol of Indigenous destruction:

At least now, Sandy One was remembering. He must have seen it clear; such things as corpses shifting with the wind or ocean water, scattered bones, ears and purses of flesh strung over a mantelpiece, and pools of water showing his own face against a blood-red sky. Yes, like an island in some bloody fluid. And he had memories even—although not strictly his own—of his

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<sup>147</sup> Uncle Jack acts out of spite for Daniel's lack of recognition of him. The novel's imagery shows how Jack is 'reborn' by pulling Daniel down a mine shaft; as one arises from the earth, the other is swallowed in a 'rhizomatic' death of sorts.

own absence. And the island sinking in the rising aftermath of violence. (284)

Nevertheless, by their 'original' connections to this liminal geography where life and death circulate through each other, Harley's family remain strangely intrigued by the sea between the headland and "heartland" (416). as islands are called in the Nyoongar language. Indeed, in their fascination a cyclical notion of cultural change, merger, and continuation is suggested, contrary to the Western model of linear progress; it is indicative of the Benang family's hybridity, and homes in on a sense of performativity through imperfect repetition:<sup>148</sup>

Jack Chatalong used to watch the lines of the horizon moving right to left, disturbingly contrary to the way his eye learned to follow the words on a page, until they gathered themselves together, and the world split, and that white flower forced its way through. It blossomed, died presumably sent its seed away. Each different, each the same. [...] toward them, with that quick moment of darkness between each one. (263–264)

But Harley comments that "out there between the headland and the heartland the sea was *grey*" (416; emphasis added). The grey sea between the coast and the islands becomes the interstitial area, the Third Space, where the black and white binary is deconstructed.

Speaking from the heart/land, it is Harley who learns to come to terms with the features of land and sea and what they represent in terms of a renewed, hybrid Indigenous Dreaming, contesting white myth. His capacity for flight is instrumental in achieving the necessary perspective on the land and the sea and to sing their features, so that levitation/elevation and flight should not be confused with the surveillant "cartographic gaze"—male, colonial and possessive.<sup>149</sup> As in *True Country*, it is not inscribed in uprootedness

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<sup>148</sup> See my discussion of Homi Bhabha's ideas on colonial mimicry and Judith Butler's on performativity in Chapter 1.

<sup>149</sup> Mark Koch, "Ruling the World: The Cartographic Gaze in Elizabethan Accounts of the New World," *Early Modern Literary Studies* 4.2 (Special Issue 3, September

but rather in a wholesome three-dimensionality, filling out a growing, postcolonizing Indigenous sense of self:

I was accustomising myself to this experience of drifting. I studied the pathways and tracks which ran along the coastal dunes, and saw the white beach as the sandy, solidified froth of small waves touching the coast. I [...] saw the tiny town of Wirlup Haven and how Grandad's historic homestead—as if shunned—clung to the road which was sealed and headed inland. So it was not pure mindless, this floating on the breeze. It required a certain concentration, and I chose it not just for the fun, but also because I wanted to view those islands resting in the sea, and to get that aerial perspective. I couldn't have said why.<sup>150</sup>

In Pablo Armellino's view, Harley's perception of land and space is juxtaposed to the traditional settler's view, which was "used to conquer and topographically create Australia [...] it is the profound connection to the territory and the consequent knowledge of all its elements that gives Harley the capacity to range freely across it." What is more, it is this aerial perspective that allows Harley to embrace the encounter of both cultures, at the meeting point of the sea and the land.<sup>151</sup>

As in *True Country*, Harley's learning process is channeled through his exposure to death, and it is in the liminal space of the undead that he acquires a voice that may reach out to his Indigenous kin and friends. Thus, Harley realizes that he has much in common with his passing 'octoroon' great-great-grandfather Sandy One Mason, washed ashore after a shipwreck and saved by the local Nyoongars:

Sandy One found himself, like me, bereft, bleached, all washed up. His memory? Nothing! [...] Like myself, caught up in a long and most unbecoming process, he had returned. Fanny must

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1998): 111–139, <http://extra.shu.ac.uk/emls/04-2/kochruli.htm> (accessed 16 April 2001).

<sup>150</sup> Scott, *Benang*, 166.

<sup>151</sup> Armellino, "Australia Re-Mapped," 28–29.



have known it, been told. Whether they were the dead returned, or not, they brought death with them. And the world changing all the time.<sup>152</sup>

Guided by Uncle Jack and Will, Harley mimicks the training Sandy One Mason received from Fanny in understanding the Indigenous land, but unlike Sandy, he perfects these lessons in his self-fashioning as an Aborigine, however different and hybrid. So, whereas Sandy's whitewashed singing of the land "sound[s] very much like a moan" due to his cancerous tongue, Harley's rendering "t[akes] on the sounds of a place rather than the words" (343, 386). Harley fully acknowledges that he is part-Indigenous, and it is in Harley's awareness of this revealing truth—that both he and Sandy One are the not-so-white-first-men-of-the-family—that the novel comes full circle, projecting its last (song)lines toward a more benign 'benang':

Yes, the birth of even an unsuccessfully first-white-man-born-in-the-family-line has required a lot of death, a lot of space, a lot of emptiness. All of which I have had in abundance. And also—it must be said—some sort of luck. I mean in that I am still here, however too-well disguised. Sandy One was no white man. Just as I am no white man [...] There was [...] an increase in the number attending my performances. I caused embarrassment, and made people feel uncomfortable. Yes, I am something of a curiosity—even for my own people [...] Speaking from the heart, I tell you that I am part of a much older story, one of a perpetual billowing from the sea, with its rhythm of return, return, and remain [...] I offer these words, especially, to those of you I embarrass, and who turn away from the shame of seeing me; or perhaps it is because your eyes smart as the wind blows the smoke a little toward you, and you hear something like a million million many-sized hearts beating, and the whispering of waves, leaves, grasses ... We are still here, Benang. (496–497)

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<sup>152</sup> Scott, *Benang*, 494–495. Further page references are in the main text.

### Doing Indigenous Life writing: Undoing the Colonial Vampire

At the turn of the twenty-first century, with *Benang* Scott produces a “shifty, snaking narrative” (24) and configures a subversive origin story as “post-contact Aboriginal Genesis.”<sup>153</sup> *Benang* is diametrically opposed to the inescapable Gothic sense of doom expressed in Mudrooroo’s Vampire trilogy; *Benang*’s hybrid male protagonist-cum-Indigenous ghost manages to plot a hopeful inbound journey into the Australian heartland and out of Ernest Scatt’s ‘death country’. As such, *Benang* reflects the capacity for Indigenous resistance and survival despite the damage inflicted by racialist policies in Australian mainstream society in the twentieth century. Thus, the novel’s palimpsest of (song)lines is rooted/routed in a multiplicity of hidden tracks that resist white civilization’s tabula-rasa imprint as manifested in the fiction of *terra nullius*:

There are in fact many paths; some only ever marked by feet, some which became wheel worn and linked water to water, others were traced by telegraph lines. All are linked by the very oldest of stories, although many of these have been broken by the laying down of the lines of steel, or have been sealed with black tar. (359)

*Benang* is scripted into the Howard government’s conservative backlash against Mabo by problematizing the issue of Indigenous identity. Yet, the regenerative politics of *True Country* were inscribed in an agenda of Indigenous revitalization and used the textual spaces opened up by Aborigine-affirmative multiculturalism and Native Title legislation in the early 1990s for Billy’s successful configuration of an Indigenous identity at the end of the novel. *Benang* was undoubtedly the result of many years of research and writing, and its publication was timely, in that it intervened in the shifty language and politics surrounding the Stolen Generations, whose plight had come to the nation’s full attention after a voluminous government report in 1997. *Benang* offers a benign inscription of Australia’s large part-

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<sup>153</sup> Fielder, “Country and Connections,” 7 of 12.

Indigenous population in country by embedding Gothic and Magical-Realist traits in a postcolonizing Dreamtime narrative: Aboriginal Reality. Thus, as John Fielder argues,

Scott, in being prepared to integrate outright assimilationist and racist discourses, is a daring writer, a writer who uses the fictional space to explore significant social concerns for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in contemporary Australia. He is aware of the tensions between radical Aboriginal resistance and the reactionary Social Darwinist impulse to see Aboriginal culture disintegrated and domesticated.<sup>154</sup>

*Benang* makes a necessary incursion into the Australian textscape by proffering Harley's whitened hybridity as the haunting sign of cultural difference, encrypted as problematic and vexed at the novel's beginning. However, by laying bare the distortions, lies, gaps, and silences in government and personal files, *Benang* becomes the liminal space from which Indigeneity and Australianness may be rewritten in race, gender, and class terms; as a member of a legally disenfranchised, promiscuously engendered 'sinister third race', the white-skinned Harley acknowledges at the end of *Benang* that his Aboriginal self is "still here, however too-well disguised."<sup>155</sup> As Scott himself writes,

Piecing together a family history, struggling to rewrite a manuscript bequeathed by his colonial, non-Indigenous and now ailing grandfather, my narrator is visited by some of his extended Indigenous family. The perspectives they offer are difficult to incorporate within his grandfather's manuscript, and it is only when he finds himself making the very sounds of the place he inhabits—of the wind, of waves, of its rustling vegetation, its welling springs, its birds and animals—that he

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<sup>154</sup> Fielder, "Country and Connections," 5 of 12.

<sup>155</sup> Scott, *Benang*, 496.

is able to convince and communicate to an audience a 'true' history, and his undeniably Indigenous identity.<sup>156</sup>

Like Sandy One, Harley is an "original"<sup>157</sup> who defies limiting conceptions of Indigeneity in terms of pristine authenticity, and traces new paths to understanding Australian identity against persistent notions of assimilative sameness. The mind-boggling genealogy of Harley's kinship relations opens up a monstrous yet liberating space in defining "bodies in excess of, or incompatible with, assimilationist and eugenic discourse, narrat[ing] and mak[ing] sense of their world." This is so because "Harley's narrative [...] creates a meeting place where diverse and multifarious stories are articulated."<sup>158</sup>

Nurturing the seeds planted in *True Country*, *Benang* proposes a vindication of new forms of Indigeneity and storytelling through a performative openness and fuzziness of identity and genre which engages with the uncanny. Binary conceptions of Indigeneity and Australianness are interrogated by blurring underlying fixities of class, race, and gender; hence, the semi-autobiographical quest novel or bildungsroman is gothicized into a shaman/djanak version of Indigenous life writing. By uprooting and confusing the objective linearity of realist prose, Lisa Slater claims,

Scott has conceived not only of a monstrous protagonist but also an excessive novel that refers beyond itself [...] the *monstrous* novel, narrated by a *monstrous* protagonist, is a powerful political act. Harley's body is Nyoongar due to complex social relations that are not static. As his body hovers and turns above the campfire, and the people stare in wonder, Harley produces new understandings of the body and identity. *Indeed, he creates new bodies*. His body is not a metaphor for that which is not white. It cannot be brought into an already

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<sup>156</sup> *Benang*, 5.

<sup>157</sup> *Benang*, 493. In the novel the term "original" is applied to Sandy One by white settlers, in reference to his belonging to the area.

<sup>158</sup> Slater, "Benang, This 'Most Local of Histories,'" 63.

established symbolic economy, but rather prevents interpretation.<sup>159</sup>

In creating a proliferation of new, hybrid bodies that give country precedence over blood and that cannot be contained by Manichean interpretations of identity, the text eventually repositions the vampiric to an enabling site for Indigenous survival, unlike Mudrooroo's fictions.

Harley becomes the discomfiting storyteller who, with "shrill"<sup>160</sup> piercing voice, sings a new world into place, firmly embedded in the family's particular Dreaming: "And deep in the chill night, ending [my] song, the curlew's cry. Deathbird, my people say. Obviously, however, I am alive. Am bringing life."<sup>161</sup> The curlew is the Benang family's symbol of death and defeat (through the massacre) as well as of proud resistance (through survival against all odds), which parallels the function of the Indigenous bird announcing Nan's death in *My Place* and Sally's inscription in *Indigeneity*. However, the haunting call of Mudrooroo's vampiric bat woman in his Vampire trilogy writes the hybrid protagonist George<sup>162</sup> out of *Indigeneity* and announces Indigenous destruction. Unlike the latter, Harley—and Scott himself—locates his true ancestry in his "blood-and-land-line, the women I must call Harriette and Fanny" Benang,<sup>163</sup> which echoes *My Place's* process of genealogical recovery through the mother-figure. Thus, the key to *Benang's* understanding of a vital proliferation of hybrid bodies is their matrilineal inscription in the Australian land, benign, embracing and empowering: "The land, not the book or the English language, becomes the site from which all life is generated."<sup>164</sup>

In configuring country as a generative textscape, *Benang* participates in a discursive politics of identity configuration by

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<sup>159</sup> "Benang, This 'Most Local of Histories,'" 71–72 (emphasis added).

<sup>160</sup> Scott, *Benang*, 386.

<sup>161</sup> *Benang*, 9–10.

<sup>162</sup> George is arguably one of the two manifestations of Mudrooroo's identity in the series that uncannily circulates through the African Wadawaka.

<sup>163</sup> Scott, *Benang*, 51.

<sup>164</sup> Slater, "Benang, This 'Most Local of Histories,'" 64–65.

revealing how “language does not reflect but creates the world.”<sup>165</sup> In the 2001 Alfred Deakin Lectures,<sup>166</sup> Kim Scott addressed the enduring effects of white Australia's creation through the power/knowledge bind of eugenicist language:

What about those government departments called Aboriginal Protection? Native Welfare? You don't have to look too closely to question just who they were protecting, and whose welfare was paramount. What sort of identity, how secure a sense of self, is expressed by the shrill voice of the white Australia policy? [...] it's insecurity, uncertainty and doubt about [...] the foundations of the nation. About who belongs. About who we are. How else to explain the hysteria surrounding a word like ‘sorry’? Or the quibbling over a phrase like ‘*Stolen generations*’?<sup>167</sup>

*Benang* textualizes the Indigenous life experience through the re/generative qualities of Harley's ‘singing’, whose polyphony, non-linear organization of plot and time, and use of association and metaphor configure a postcolonizing counterdiscourse of hybridity. The primacy of Indigenous singing over non-Indigenous writing while using English constitutes an unsettling narrative ritual which renews the Indigenous inscription of country and re/creates the Indigenous universe through a merger of tabula rasa and palimpsest narrative. This re/creation necessarily takes issue with common images that address the increased whitening of Indigenous culture,

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<sup>165</sup> Lisa Slater, “Kim Scott's *Benang*: An Ethics of Uncertainty,” in *ASAL* 4 (2005): 157.

<sup>166</sup> The Alfred Deakin Lectures are an important set of yearly addresses to the nation by scholars etc., broadcasted by Australia's *Radio National*. They are inscribed in a philosophy of nation-building, openness and “fair go” as the *Radio National* webpage holds—see “The Alfred Deakin Lectures,” in *ABC Radio National* (2002), <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/deakin/default.html> (accessed 10 June 2009).

<sup>167</sup> Scott, “Australia's Continuing Neurosis.” The paradigm of Indigenous/non-Indigenous relations has shifted after, in February 2008, the new, Prime Minister elect, Labour's Kevin Rudd, offered an official *Apology* to the Aboriginal peoples for the plight they have suffered as a result of the white colonisation of Australia. This apology was a moving though largely symbolic affair, as there was no program of economic and social aid attached to improve the structurally underprivileged situation of many Aborigines.

such as the repetitive mirror scenes in which Harley, Kathleen, and Topsy contemplate the traces of their hybridity<sup>168</sup>—"The mirror, that mirror mirror [...] who's the fairest of them all?" (160).

Perhaps quite hidden to the mainstream reader, *Benang* also cyclically repeats oblique metaphors to underline the innovative performative character of Indigenized textual production. Imbued with variable meaning, they work toward a combination of continuation and change—of new life that develops its ever-changing, multifarious manifestations out of steady roots. The horizontal, rhizomatic flow of the text is interrupted at different points by the vertical 'slashes' of non-Indigenous cords and ribbons, which, in turn, are mirrored in the shreds of bark peeling from autochthonous paperbark trees. The attractive colors of these ribbons belie the increased whitening of the landscape, and imbue the text with a false sense of celebration. They tend to hang from the ceilings of white homesteads as a symbol of the imposition of white civilization, are connected to the violent frontier justice wielded against the Nyoongars, and are used to seduce, abduct, and rape Indigenous women:

It may be that a reader is wondering about my own mother, especially in such a story of men, with silent women flitting in the background; and I almost wish I were one of those pioneers with *coloured ribbons* to pull and bring the girls running. For different reasons, of course. (400, 469, 491)

A nonpatriarchal, non-Western inscription of the Indigenous narrative requires Indigenous support for textuality, to be found in a rhizomatic reversal of the paper-making process that destroys trees to produce the thin, insubstantial white surfaces on which the history of imperial progress and expansion is written. Thus, it is part of Harley's remedy to respect these trees from the life-sustaining root level up and to gather into 'paper talk' the multiple paperbark strips

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<sup>168</sup> Scott, *Benang*, 14, 160, 163, 371. Note this is how Sally Morgan discovers her likeness to her white grandfather, Howden Drake-Brockman—see chapter 2. Further page references are in the main text.

they shred as a gift bestowed upon his quest for healing scraps of regenerative communication with the land.

The variety of Indigenous paperbark trees Harley encounters on his walkabout offers shelter and an invigorating sense of rootedness, and shreds of paperbark dangle from the treetops as though ribbons from ceilings (382). Following the path indicated by his uncles' songlines along these spots of shelter, Harley eventually traces his way back to Fanny's inscription in the land in order to find a way out of the linguistic constraints that support patriarchal Western narrative:

Fanny led her family through a terrain in which she recognised the trace of her own ancestors, and looked for her people. She brought them back. I would like to think that I do a similar thing. But I found myself among paper, and words formed by an intention corresponding to my own, and I read a world weak in its creative spirit. There is no other end, no other destination for all this *paper talk* but to keep doing it, to keep talking, to remake it (473–474; emphasis added).<sup>169</sup>

As with identity, writing is a never-ending performative process of rehearsing, producing, revising, polishing, and adapting, but dues must always be paid to the circumstances as the script develops and unfolds. Scott therefore dedicates *Benang* to the women in his life, "as my wife and mother advise" (502), and the year 2005 saw the publication of his family story from the perspective of his aunt, the Nyoongar Elder Kayang Hazel Brown. A promiscuous reconfiguration of Gothic writing as Maban singing becomes the tool with which to forge new, hybrid identity inscriptions that undercut white male notions of Indigeneity as a (post)colonial underclass. They allow vast

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<sup>169</sup> Scott's references to paperbark and papertalk are significant in that they hark back to the work and person of Mudrooroo, whose renaming is Nyoongar for 'paperbark'. He co-edited the volume *Paperbark: A Collection of Black Australian Writings* (1990), with Jack Davis, Adam Shoemaker, and Kevin Gilbert. In 1997 he rewrote his seminal study on the Indigenous literature of Australia, *Writing from the Fringe* (1990), under the new title *Milli Milli Wangka*, or 'papertalk' in Nyoongar. The link between oral and written Indigenous literature and its natural support is evident.



numbers of part-Aborigines to repopulate and reterritorialize the Australian land- and textscape, and to defy the eugenicist policies and language of dispossession, dislocation, and removal that have vampirized so many into a false sense of whiteness.

Harley's shamanic condition of being "strangely uplifted; one who hovers and need only touch the ground lightly" provides him with an unbounded vision of Indigenous belonging which allows him "to show [...] where and who we are" (452, 456). Having learnt to speak from the heart/land, he succeeded as an Aborigine, a success matched by his failure as a white man. His Indigenous elevation ironically confirms the eugenicist motto "to uplift a despised race," but re-roots/routes the vampiric into Indigenous Australian soil rather than proposing an Indigenous hunger for 'white blood'. The latter, together with his capacity to generate Indigenous corporeality through his singing, makes him a spiritual manifestation of the Indigenous Dreaming rather than an Indigenous Count Dracula. As argued in the previous chapter, Mudrooroo ultimately fell prey to an exclusionary notion of identity heavily promoted by himself as self-appointed spokesman of the Nyoongar and Indigenous community at large. Scott "recognises" that he wrote *Benang* "at a time when authors were having their Indigenous identities challenged—Colin 'Mudrooroo' Johnson, Archie Weller, 'Wanda Koolmatrie'."<sup>170</sup> He also addresses the Mudrooroo Affair in *Kayang and Me*, pointing out that the latter's Indigenous identity is still a matter of debate among Nyoongars. Scott understands Indigenous writers who "advocate [...] exclud[ing non-Indigenes] back—to show them how it feels" and thus create an exclusionary sense of Indigenous solidarity; yet he does not sympathize with this stance in view of his own life experience as an "anomalous," white-skinned, urban professional Aborigine.<sup>171</sup>

Intent upon accommodating his own identity, Scott believes, rather, that an exclusionary politics of the Indigenous body would be counterproductive in light of the inevitability of the hybridization and redefinition of Australianness at large. As he is aware that he writes

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<sup>170</sup> Scott, "Strangers at home," 5.

<sup>171</sup> Scott & Brown, *Kayang and Me*, 204–205.

“for a predominantly white, educated audience,”<sup>172</sup> *Benang* participates in a kind of national corroboree, “a meeting place [...] in which Australians can begin to rearticulate the country and themselves, in [...] a dialogic style of writing,” in which his third novel, *That Deadman Dance*, can be placed.<sup>173</sup> Naturally, Scott wants “to acknowledge and celebrate [his] non-Indigenous family and, by extension, all aspects of Australian heritage.” However, he does not “see how this can be justly done without the *primacy* of Indigenous culture and society being properly established”:

Unfortunately our shared history has demonstrated that the alternative—accommodating Noongar society within ‘white’ society—has proved impossible, to the detriment of what we all might be. As I see it, this is reason enough to offer those who insist on asking why a small amount of Noongar blood can make you a Noongar, while any amount of white blood needn’t make you white. It’s considered a political position, intended to foreground inequalities in our society, and particularly in our history.<sup>174</sup>

Scott’s words are tantamount to saying that any adherence to the blood question is not a biological given but a political choice embedded in a context of unequal access to Australia’s physical and moral economy—but has this ever been otherwise?

Thus, the fiction of authenticity may be *strategically* employed to recover an Indigenous heritage for the greater good of the Australian nation. It is as if the changes in the political context of Indigeneity induced by Mabo, Native Title, Reconciliation/Apology, the Stolen Generations, and the insistent calls for recognition and sovereignty have reversed the thrust of white vampiric infection and proliferation, gothicizing as well as empowering Indigenous ‘blood’ as the only remedy to return color and life to the land. As Scott

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<sup>172</sup>Susan Midalia, “Benang by Kim Scott,” at *Freemantle Press* ([www.freemantlepress.com.au](http://www.freemantlepress.com.au), 1 May 2005), <http://www.facp.iinet.net.au/teachingnotes/benangnotes.php> (accessed 2 May 2008).

<sup>173</sup>Slater, “Kim Scott’s *Benang*: An Ethics of Uncertainty,” 157.

<sup>174</sup>Scott & Brown, *Kayang and Me*, 207 (emphasis added).

argues, nowadays a single drop of Indigenous blood is enough to make one Indigenous, but the opposite no longer holds. This takes us back to the work that Sally Morgan has done for the Indigenous community over the last two decades and how it may undo a feeble genetic starting point of Indigenous belonging, reminiscent of Scott's own,<sup>175</sup> while an author like Mudrooroo finds himself excluded despite an Indigenous life experience and important contribution to the Indigenous cause in critical and fictional work. In such a strategic employment of identity politics, the disturbing situation may obtain that an ostensibly light-skinned person is considered Indigenous but a dark-skinned person may not—a situation which deconstructs the category of race in its blurring of color distinctions. This paradox is rooted in “a position of *temporary* closure of Nyoongar identity, whilst also insisting on differentiation.”<sup>176</sup> The latter is, as Lisa Slater argues, precisely the uncanny minority space Scott writes from, which defies the eugenicist language of racial differentiation by using it against itself, and produces a new, postcolonizing, performative language of identity which is at once familiar and strange.

A strategic conception of identity politics allows a coming to terms with identity's uncanny manifestations, and may turn fear and rejection into understanding, negotiation, and acceptance, overcoming the binary restrictions imposed by oppressor and victim positions that perpetuate a “dead-end” colonialist narrative.<sup>177</sup> As Lisa Slater holds, “Scott is suggesting that liberation can only be ‘discovered’ through an ethical engagement with strangers—the stranger self.”<sup>178</sup> It is a disturbing yet productive “encounter with the other whereby their radical alterity cannot be reduced to one's knowing.” She goes on to explain:

an encounter with alterity is a performative moment that cannot be regulated, foreseen or dominated in advance [...] The exposure to the other reveals the radical social construction of our *self*; indeed, that we are reliant on the

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<sup>175</sup> Buck, “Trees that Belong Here.”

<sup>176</sup> Slater, “*Benang*, This ‘Most Local of Histories,’” 70 (emphasis added).

<sup>177</sup> Buck, “Trees that Belong Here.”

<sup>178</sup> Slater, “Making Strange Men,” 369.

other for our self [...] Ethics is reliant on self-exposure—an openness to the other [...] In the performative utterance of addressing one's unknowable interlocutor, a gap is opened in one's identity, in which the self is reconfigured.<sup>179</sup>

Therefore, the defamiliarizing turbulences of, and ripples in, the authenticity debate should be taken as discursive rather than essentialist stages in the performative unfolding of the script that endlessly writes identity into place. And as a story about "place, and what has grown from it," *Benang's* fictional life writing refuses to acknowledge a white patriarchal narrative that organizes kinship relations according to the hierarchical rigidities and sequencing of oedipal conflict; instead, it simultaneously speaks to the past, present, and future of Indigeneity and Australianness from a hybrid site that is enabling, inclusive, nurturing, and regenerative, in ways that Sally Morgan's instance of life writing and *True Country* rehearsed some years earlier. As John Fielder argues,

*Benang* considers Aboriginal and settler relationships over an extended time-frame, taking into account individual and communal histories, personal psychology, social change and discursive forms. In doing so it complements Aboriginal life narratives but starts where those texts end: Scott embeds personal experience in an historical and epistemological framework where it takes on its most complete meaning.<sup>180</sup>

As such, Scott's hybrid fiction is an expression of Aboriginal Reality that rekindles Indigenous memory by forging counternarrative as counterhistory; it constitutes a form of literary 'black' magic that reworks traditional Indigenous storytelling methods into empowering new literary form and content subverting "such linear notions as 'progress,' and 'social evolution.'"<sup>181</sup>

*Benang* may therefore be understood as rewriting on a grand, epic scale an old family story that the novel places in Aunt Harriette's

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<sup>179</sup> Slater, "Kim Scott's *Benang*: An Ethics of Uncertainty," 148–149.

<sup>180</sup> Fielder, "Country and Connections," 7 of 12.

<sup>181</sup> Kunhikrishnan, "Identity Narratives."

custody, which roots Scott's family history firmly in matrilineal inscription. Aunt Harriette tells Harley about the curlew—the shy, Indigenous bird which symbolizes the qualities of the Benang mob.<sup>182</sup> Significantly, as a wading bird the curlew bridges land and water, reflecting the origins of Harley's family, and, in its further connections to the frontier massacre at Gebalup and the regenerating capacity of water, it is ambiguously poised between life and death; the latter is a condition and position which the novel may be seen to occupy by developing the Gothic into Aboriginal Reality. Perhaps contrary to the mainstream readership's expectations of Gothic narrative, this "deathbird's" haunting, awe-inspiring cry from hiding exhorts Harley (and Scott) to "remember" and "hold yourself proud. You are as good as anyone, better."<sup>183</sup>

### History Beyond Life Writing: *That Deadman Dance*

#### *Colonial Invisibility*

Indigenous-Australian authors have availed themselves of life writing to recount the Indigenous life experience, but are increasingly operating in the realm of full-fledged fiction. The latter offers conceptual freedom beyond the limitations and impositions of a colonizing discourse on Indigeneity and its embodiments, and questions paradigmatic whiteness in the mainstream reception of Indigenous literature. In *The Postcolonial Eye*, Alison Ravenscroft unpacks white readings of Indigenous literature as an Aboriginalist

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<sup>182</sup> Scott, *Benang*, 153. Kim Scott explains this tale in detail in *Kayang and Me*, after pointing out that his kin are known as the *wilomin* or curlew-like people. It is ostensibly told to him by his aunt, Kayang Hazel Brown, the co-author of the volume: "The boy asked the mother why those [curlew] birds were doing that, making such a scary sound. She told him those wilo had seen him slouching and dragging his feet as he walked home from school, and they were jeering at him. She said he should remember to hold his head up. Walk like them, perhaps she meant, like a wading bird; deliberate, fastidious, proud. Don't slump like the defeated or dead, but have the poise of those surrounded by risk and habitually wary" (Scott & Brown, *Kayang and Me*, 25).

<sup>183</sup> *Benang*, 287.

form of writing the Self. According to her, reading constitutes an autobiographical exercise that performs white identity for a “subject-who-desires-whiteness.”<sup>184</sup> This sees textual interpretation as a subjective practice informed by the particular interests of the reading subject, and thus biased and incomplete: white readings of Indigenous literature tend to imply a discursive blindness to incommensurability which, at the same time, is bound up with an uncanny potential for the resurgence of the Indigenous other as radical alterity. In other words, “what falls from view,” as Ravenscroft so elegantly has it,<sup>185</sup> denotes a transcultural epistemological gap.

We have already seen how Slavoj Žižek’s post-Marxist critique of ideology formation fleshes out such a gap. Žižek holds that no discourse is capable of encompassing our material reality but always operates as an incomplete “symbolic fiction” that is imposed, blind to, and repressive of difference. Ideology necessarily obscures alterity, which subsists and returns as the “spectral apparition” of the unrepresentable or “non-symbolized real”<sup>186</sup>; that is to say, what is discursively left out of view haunts us in its attempt to re-embodiment in what is perceived as material reality. Žižek speaks of discursive spectrality as “failed alternative histories” and “fictions” that “‘estrangle’ us from the self-evidence of its established identity.”<sup>187</sup> These fictions beckon toward the uncanny, the ghostly, and the Gothic, precisely because what seems immaterial, spectral, to the non-Indigenous eye and cannot seem to flesh out in the Western real (or eye) does very much ‘matter’. I read Kim Scott’s *That Deadman Dance* (2010) as part of such a discursive re-embodiment of Indigeneity as Australianness.

*That Deadman Dance* reaches out to Australian readers with a more straightforward story, structure, and agenda than its predecessor *Benang*. Generally deemed a less complex and less

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<sup>184</sup> Alison Ravenscroft, *The Postcolonial Eye. White Australian Desire and the Visual Field of Race* (Farnham & Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2012): 1.

<sup>185</sup> Ravenscroft, *The Postcolonial Eye*, 1.

<sup>186</sup> Slavoj Žižek, “The Spectre of Ideology,” in *Mapping Ideology*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London & New York: Verso, 1994): 25–26.

<sup>187</sup> Žižek, “The Spectre of Ideology,” 7.

demanding novel than its predecessor,<sup>188</sup> *That Deadman Dance* represents a failed alternative history of crosscultural hope, understanding, hospitality, respect, and their corruption in Žižek's discursive sense. It reimagines a missed opportunity for peaceful cohabitation at a moment of first-contact innocence that was lost in the thrust of colonization and national self-definition, and functions as a postcolonizing form of Dreaming narrative—Aboriginal Reality—on the level of Indigenous communal history. Scott skillfully uses Western form to give a credible, nuanced, crosscultural account from a Nyoongar perspective, involving a wide range of Indigenous and non-Indigenous characters with a variety of interests and motivations. Published within the popular genre of the historical novel, it is set on the Western-Australian south coast in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, at what historians have called the 'friendly frontier'.<sup>189</sup> Scott recognizes this geographical area as his Nyoongar homeland<sup>190</sup> and so spreads his roots by employing a communal rather than individual perspective. In a similar logic, some of the Nyoongar characters, such as Manit, Wunyeran, and Binyan, are connected to Scott's forebears,<sup>191</sup> and thus this novel follows in the footsteps of the documentary work carried out with his Elder Hazel Brown in *Kayang and Me*.

*That Deadman Dance* is thus engaged in the retrieval and embodiment of Scott's own local Indigenous history by subtly questioning the peaceful nature of this first-contact environment; by placing this investigation before the impact of later genocidal developments, it aims to participate in the History and Culture Wars

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<sup>188</sup> Patrick Allington, "Nothing personal: a new novel from the author of *Benang*," *Australian Book Review* 325 (October 2012): 11–12, <http://search.informit.com.au.ezproxy.scu.edu.au/fullText;dn=201010486;res=APAFT> (accessed 18 May 2012); Richard Carr, "A story of what-might-but-could-not-have-been: Review of Scott, Kim. *That Deadman Dance*," *Antipodes* 25.2 (December 2011), 212–213, <http://search.informit.com.au.ezproxy.scu.edu.au/fullText;dn=81114280441;res=APAFT> (accessed 18 May 2012).

<sup>189</sup> Kim Scott, *That Deadman Dance* (Sydney: Picador, 2010): 397.

<sup>190</sup> Scott, *Benang*, bionote.

<sup>191</sup> Scott, *That Deadman Dance*, 399.

from a less confrontational, conciliatory perspective. As Scott says in an interview,

So in this novel, the characters are like those fellas in early contact and not a few generations into an oppressed culture. So you're not in the dead end of polemics, constantly reacting against the status quo with anger. You're trying to work with healing and the strength of the cultural tradition, the heritage. Not to be shrill, polemic or trapped in the paradigm that's being set up for us.<sup>192</sup>

As we have seen, the debate on the nature of Australia's European colonization, story, and history has been engaged in conflictive claims on the ownership of the continent's land and resources, in which the mainstream palimpsest of colonization as benign settlement has long had the upper hand. This narrative is premised on the denial of the Indigenous' human status, which obscures the universal principles of hospitality—the roles of host and guest that must underpin any equitable form of intercultural contact across individuals, communities, and nations. *That Deadman Dance* is significantly set in first-contact times, when Indigenous Australians were still masters of their own continental home, and hospitality would be offered to the European settlers as their visitors' right of passage across country and sharing common resources, as has often been pointed out in the literature—see, for instance, Henry Reynolds' body of work. Scott paints the Indigenous communities as generous hosts and sovereign landlords, while the bulk of white settlers are described as arrogant, insensitive, and ungrateful guests to the continent, with a fair range of notable exceptions which the text vaunts as a model for intercultural contact to follow, and aligns the novel with the current push for Indigenous sovereignty in the Australian constitution and society. The following will look at the intolerance of, and blindness to,

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<sup>192</sup> Anne Brewster, "Can You Anchor a Shimmering Nation State via Regional Indigenous Roots? Kim Scott talks to Anne Brewster about *That Deadman Dance*," *Cultural Studies Review* 18.1 (2012): 235, <http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/csrj/index> (accessed 1 March 2012).



cultural difference and the resulting inability of the white colonizers to meet Indigenous hospitality in kind.

### *Indigenous Hospitality*

*That Deadman Dance* starts out as a captivating story of exploratory encounters on Australia's southwest coast between the local Nyoongar hosts and the first European visitors, who quickly forget their condition of being guests to the continent and, as history has proven, justify this loss of etiquette with the presumed superiority of Western civilization and the consequent denial of the Indigene's humanity. Ever aware of the subtle nuances of language, Scott steers clear of any terminology that may strategically position Europeans in competition with the local Nyoongars in their claims to the continent; the Nyoongars always remain sovereign First Australians and First Nations, as opposed to the European 'Old Settlers' that first arrived in the late eighteenth century. Scott's depiction of first contact eschews and dismantles linguistic colonialism in the terminology that opposes the white mainstream or Old Settlers to the 'New Australians' who immigrated from non-Anglo-Celtic nations in the twentieth century and so erroneously claims their birthright to the land. Nyoongar sovereignty is never relinquished, while the right to hospitality is respected, and so some white settlers do realize that in their search for land to develop they "were helped on our journey, the black people led us here. They are friendly, indeed."<sup>193</sup> Yet, the story shifts from incipient Indigenous hospitality, generosity, collaboration, and cultural exchange into an account of Western invasion and takeover as white numbers increase, incomprehension grows, disease hits, and firearms clear the way. The European guests to the continent end up ignoring the elementary principles of hospitality, the basis for any sharing and fruitful intercultural contact.

Jacques Derrida's unpacking of Kant's notion of *Weltbürgerschaft*—global citizenship, cosmopolitanism—as elaborated in the latter's essay *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical*

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<sup>193</sup> Scott, *That Deadman Dance*, 141.

*Sketch* (1795)<sup>194</sup> lays bare what is at stake in the uneven colonial exchange. Derrida's essay "Hostipitality" (2000), written at a time in which Europe's reluctantly multicultural composition was undergoing stress, analyzes the rules of hospitality as the necessary conditions for global peace and citizenship to obtain: the stranger must be received as well as act as a friend in order to visit and live elsewhere, and so become a *Weltbürger* or cosmopolitan human being. This conditioning also marks the dangerous quality of the encounter across the rifts of cultural difference and the unknown:

The welcomed guest [*hôte*] is a stranger treated as a friend or ally, as opposed to the stranger treated as an enemy (friend/enemy, hospitality/hostility). The pair we will continue to speak of, hospitality/hostility, is in place.<sup>195</sup>

As Derrida points out, both 'hospitality' and 'hostility' are derived from the same Latin root, *hostis*, meaning host, guest, as well as enemy (3, 15), which, in a typical deconstructionist maneuver, allows the word to be "parasitized by its opposite" (3). In other words, as with the uncanny, word meaning ultimately folds back onto itself in the pairs host/guest and friend/enemy and blurring discrete borders.

The latter poises the notion of the guest (visitor/stranger/other) on the uncanny threshold of the familiar and unfamiliar, the comforting and threatening, the welcome and unwelcome: the guest is always an ambiguous f(r)riend. There exists, then, a very fine line between safety and threat in the host/guest relationship, the ambiguity of which must be negotiated in order for true hospitality to obtain. To Derrida (and to Kant) hospitality is not an unconditional, philanthropic 'given', but an exchange conditioned by mutual rights and obligations, a gift premised on the host's sovereignty at 'his' house (note the gendered quality of this sovereignty), be it the homestead, the larger (language) community, or the nation: "the law

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<sup>194</sup>Immanuel Kant, "Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch," in *Kant's Political Writings*, ed. & tr. Hans Reiss (*Zum ewigen Frieden: Ein philosophischer Entwurf*, 1795; Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1970): 93–130.

<sup>195</sup>Jacques Derrida, "Hostipitality," *Angelaki* 5.3 (2000): 4. Further page references are in the main text.

of identity de-limits the very place of proffered hospitality and maintains authority over it" (3–4). Kant already pointed out how the basic, civil terms of hospitality were disrespected in the colonial enterprise:

*If we compare with this ultimate end the inhospitable conduct of the civilized states of our continent, especially the commercial states, the injustice which they display in visiting foreign countries and peoples (which in their case is the same as conquering them) seems appallingly great. America, the negro countries, the Spice Islands, the Cape, etc. were looked upon at the time of their discovery as ownerless territories; for the native inhabitants were counted as nothing. (5)*<sup>196</sup>

The uncanny ambiguity that Derrida finds and expresses in the portmanteau coinage 'hostipitality'—the host and guest are f(r)iends—also informs Kant's argument and locates European colonial conduct in Australia in the realm of betrayal and treachery, inasmuch as it did not correspond to the Indigenous hospitality offered. The false rhetoric of *terra nullius* allowed the white settlers to justify stealing the Indigenous land from its rightful inhabitants,<sup>197</sup> who were never treated as equals and so never offered treaties that recognized the rights and sovereignty inherent in their First-Nation status. The inability to see the Aborigines as fellow humans therefore constitutes a self-righteous and self-interested element of blindness in Australia's white version of colonial history that has found its way to the present day through the narrative of benign settlement.

<sup>196</sup> Kant, "Perpetual Peace," quoted in Derrida, "Hostipitality" (emphasis added).

<sup>197</sup> Aboriginal ownership of the land (whereby 'ownership' cannot be construed in Western terms of inalienable property) was denied on the basis of the alleged absence of sedentary forms of settlement and agriculture. *That Deadman Dance* describes, however, how the Nyoongar lived in well-defined, discrete territories based on local belonging and lore, how they tended the country they inhabited using fire, and how their society was built on Law. Thus, when the most expansive European character in the novel, Geordie Chaine, sees country as "almost a cultivated landscape" (47), he does not realize how true his words are. Significantly, Aboriginal Australia is described as a well-tended environment in Bill Gammage, *The Biggest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines Made Australia* (Sydney & Melbourne: Allen & Unwin, 2011).

Aileen Moreton-Robinson considers the prevalence of this traditional colonial narrative to be a white truth regime of racial superiority: whiteness is “the invisible norm against which other races are judged in the construction of identity representation, decision making, subjectivity, nationalism, knowledge production and the law.”<sup>198</sup> As *True Country* and *Benang* make evident, Kim Scott’s writing counters this invisible white norm to work toward an agenda of Indigenous intellectual sovereignty; this is a state of intellectual independence “which cannot, by definition, be assimilated to the settler state” and its repressive paradigms, as Anne Brewster writes.<sup>199</sup> The notion of Indigenous invisibility, their absence as *human* presence, looms large in the tragic final pages of *That Deadman Dance*, a devastating scene of failed crosscultural communication which announces the demise of Nyoongar Law and sovereignty over the land. The white colonizers literally turn away from Indigeneity and refuse to see and acknowledge it as an instance of human civilization, leading up to colonial history as we have traditionally known it.

*That Deadman Dance* gives testimony to the betrayal of the universal hospitality principle in its juxtaposition of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Europeans, initially white settlers versus some white sealers who kill Nyoongar men and abduct and rape their women, but later also through the impact of capitalist greed on human relationships among the white colonizers and between these and the Nyoongars. Scott casts a whole series of colonial stereotypes to illustrate and universalize this argument, emblematically expressed in many of the British characters’ last names. Thus Dr Cross, the founder of the white colony of King George Town (present-day Albany in WA) and—as his name suggests—a suffering, almost Christ-like figure “endowed with curiosity, compassion and [...] considerable

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<sup>198</sup> Aileen Moreton-Robinson, “Towards a new research agenda?: Foucault, whiteness and Indigenous sovereignty,” *Journal of Sociology* 42.4 (December 2006): 391, <http://search.informit.com.au.ezproxy.scu.edu.au/fullText;dn=200701866;res=APAF>T (accessed 3 November 2012).

<sup>199</sup> Anne Brewster, “Whiteness and Indigenous Sovereignty in Kim Scott’s *That Deadman Dance*,” *JEASA* (2011): 63, <http://www.easa-australianstudies.net/files/jeasa22brewster7.pdf> (accessed 12 November 2015).

ambition"<sup>200</sup>—thinks along the humanitarian lines stipulated by the British Colonial Office. He recognizes the Nyoongars' essential humanity and how their patterns of movement and occupation of the land respond to rational principles empowered by their Law. He also realizes that any form of contact should be based on fair exchange—"give and take, not all benefit going one way"—and that the usurpation of their land is unacceptable. Indeed, "why must it matter so much to him that the lives of the natives would be altered forever and their *generosity* and *friendliness* be betrayed?" (60, 62).

Yet, the upcoming middle-class career maker Georgie Chaine, who is ruthlessly 'unchained' in his ambitions, responds to Cross's concerns by imposing the argument of settler rights and civil behavior to impose Western authority over Nyoongar sovereignty. Whereas, upon first contact, the settlers did not dare resist Nyoongar trespassing on their newly established premises, now Chaine argues that increased white numbers allow a different approach which will criminalize the Nyoongars' behavior so as to bend it to white standards: "Their numbers are not so large, said Chaine. We have police and military and able-bodied men [...] steps must be taken" (259). Chaine shows himself to be an unscrupulous career maker without respect or understanding for his Indigenous hosts, and as white numbers grow, his realpolitik will take over the colony, sanctioned by Governor Spender's request for a "further contingent of police and soldiers" to subdue the "Gang of Natives" (379).

Chaine's daughter Christine, whose given name is an obvious derivative of Jesus Christ, is in love with the Indigenous protagonist of the story, Bobby, but betrothed to the "very good match" of the Governor's son, Hugh (366). The colonial conflict plays itself out, therefore, on the level of intimate relationships as well. Long torn between two lovers, she finally accepts that the Indigenous hosts' rights, authority, and sovereignty have effectively been hollowed out in the process of white colonization on the premise of the latter's being a 'superior' culture, and supports her father's view that Nyoongar "ownership" of the land cannot be put "against what we have achieved in so short a time," so she pragmatically concludes that a forbearing attitude with former license taken by the Nyoongar in

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<sup>200</sup> Scott, *That Deadman Dance*, 34. Further page references are in the main text.

their contact with the white settlers “may have been expedient at one time, but was no longer necessary” (367).

The novel’s Nyoongar main character, Bobby Wabalanginy, summarizes this movement toward the negation of humanity, sovereignty, and, thus, hospitality in the closing pages:

My friends, you here are all my friends, *blackfellas* and *whitefellas* I hear people saying but we are not just our colour [...] I’m guilty of taking food from you but that’s not stealing and I did no wrong. I can’t be sorry I share and look after families and friends and many of you sitting here today [...] One time, with Mr Cross, he share his food and his beds with us, because he say he our *guest*. But not now, so we got to do it ourselves. One time we *share* kangaroo wallaby [...] Too many. But now not like that, and sheep and bullock everywhere and *too many strangers wanna take things for themselves and leave nothing*. Whales nearly all gone now, and the men that kill them they gone away, too, and now we can’t even walk up river away from the sea in cold rainy time. *Gotta walk around fences and guns*, and sheep and bullock get the goodest water. They messing up the water, cutting the earth. What, we can’t kill and eat them? And we now *strangers to our special places*”. (391–392, emphases added)

The disenfranchisement, displacement, and dispossession Bobby denounces constitute a relevant reminder of the very living conditions suffered by the metropolitan underclasses of early industrial Britain, whose minor crimes in the battle for survival often earned them their removal to the Australian penal colony. As we saw in chapter 1, these ‘sins’ are then projected onto the Indigenous population, whom they aim to “Lord it over” (95) in sinister denial-cum-expiation of their own metropolitan suffering:

Skelly hated his own people, the ‘English’. My white people, he said with a grimace. And the blacks were beneath him; he made that clear. He was going to forge a different life for himself here. Had to, there was no going back. He was a convict. (253)

While the novel certainly encourages a dark reading of the white presence on Australian soil, the subtlety of Scott's prose undoes the benign settlement paradigm precisely because it remains nuanced in its description of a wealth of Europeans and Indigenes in crosscultural misunderstanding, in which Bobby Wabalanginy, whose Nyoongar first name is the hard-to-pronounce Biirdiwa (307), centrally participates and mediates.

*"All of Us Playing Together": Bobby Wabalanginy and Whiteness*

Biirdiwa's British given name, an ironic reference to the British local policeman or bobby (156), juxtaposes the imposition of leadership and authority to the wish to rewrite convention, and arguably the novel is written in precisely this field of discursive tension: "Wabalanginy, Menak had recently said to him, means all of us playing together. But you often go alone. And we cannot always be playing" (350). The "all of us playing together" expressed in Bobby's Nyoongar last name, so hard to pronounce for the English that it becomes a playful kind of gibberish, suggests room for a transcultural playground (9, 350), yet the very fact that his Nyoongar name is unintelligible and unpronounceable to the settlers also foreshadows the failure of the intercultural experiment. An engaging cultural trespasser and resourceful trickster<sup>201</sup> who "took on new shapes around the one spirit that need never fear an ending,"<sup>202</sup> Bobby encapsulates all the hope and disappointment in the crosscultural encounter the novel musters.

Bobby is "invaluable in preserving good relationships between the blacks and [Europeans],"<sup>203</sup> and already acts as an expert cultural go-between in boyhood. He is universally liked by Indigenes and settlers, shows great dexterity at learning and mimicry, and, unlike most Nyoongar, feels equally at home on the land and at sea, his totemic animal being the whale.<sup>204</sup> Scott skillfully plays on the

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<sup>201</sup> Brewster, "Whiteness and Indigenous Sovereignty," 65.

<sup>202</sup> Scott, *That Deadman Dance*, 158.

<sup>203</sup> *That Deadman Dance*, 370.

<sup>204</sup> *That Deadman Dance*, 166.

Biblical story of Jonah in the whale in the Gospel of Matthew,<sup>205</sup> which signifies Jesus Christ's impending resurrection and becomes a powerful origin myth for the Nyoongar:

The whale comes up to breathe and the man looks out through its eye and sees only the ocean, and birds in the sky. No sign of land. But he trusts the song his father gave him, and he makes the whale dive again, and again, and makes the whale take him deep and far. Until the whale takes him onto the beach, and the women on the beach love him and bring all their people there, and they all feast and altogether party. In that story the man returns home, his children with him and their two mothers, pregnant again the both of them.<sup>206</sup>

Bobby successfully manages crosscultural conflict and defuses misunderstanding and violence, and acts as an expert guide to

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<sup>205</sup> "The Sign of Jonah," in *BibleGateway* (1973; Biblica, 2011), vol. 12: 38–41, vol. 16: 4,

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew%2012&version=NIV> (accessed 13 March 2015). In the New Testament, Jonah is tested after not obeying God, who has ordered him to preach to the people of Nineveh. He sacrifices himself at sea to appease the angry elements and so saves the crew of the ship he is traveling on. Cast into the depths, he is swallowed by a whale, and, renewing his pledge of loyalty to God from within the stomach of the sea creature, he is spewed out, saved, and redeemed. The NT reads:

Matthew 12:38. Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him [Jesus], "Teacher, we want to see a sign from you."

Matthew 12:39. He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah."

Matthew 12:40. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

Matthew 12:41. The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now something greater than Jonah is here.

Matthew 16:4. A wicked and adulterous generation looks for a sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah." Jesus then left them and went away."

<sup>206</sup> Scott, *That Deadman Dance*, 295. Further page references are in the main text.



Nyoongar country for the European settlers. His capacity for mediation acquires a supernatural touch when, still as a young boy, he calls a diseased Nyoongar back to life to avoid a case of ritual payback against the white settlers, who are being accused of spreading fatal disease. Bobby appears to have taken the dead man's place for the gift of life, but as he is "very spiry [...] even in these years before he reached adolescence" (146–147), he revives from the ghostly realm of the dead. His uncommon abilities are acknowledged when his father and Dr Cross parade him on their shoulders after his feat. Likewise, his performative skills stand out in ritual dance and song, when he—still as a boy—invents and leads the Deadman Dance in order to curb the white invaders's impact. Standing outside the realm of the ordinary (376), he later becomes an inspired leader (301) as well as *djanak* or shaman (84, 147, 306) for his people, deriving his power from his totem animal, the whale: "Bobby said he first saw the Dead Man Dance from the ocean, not the shore. Right there, and he pointed to the deep water close to shore where we'd all seen the whales come" (69–70).

Yet, his considerable powers of conviction are unable to contain the growing gap between Indigenes and settlers derived from radical cultural difference and the battle for resources, and his eventual failure as a cultural go-between reflects the larger drama of enforced Christian civilization. The Indigenes share their land and its wealth with the whites on the basis of universal hospitality and the exchange of tools, resources, and knowledge but are generally not met with equivalent generosity. Old Bobby, now a decrepit tourist attraction in old age, expresses sad wisdom to this effect:

my country is here, and belonged to my father, and his father, and his father before him too. But to look at me now you wouldn't think that [...] Me and my people ... My people and I (he winked) are not so good traders as we thought. We thought making friends was the best thing, and never knew that when we took your flour and sugar and tea and blankets that we'd lose everything of ours. We learned your words and songs and stories, and never knew you didn't want to hear ours. (106)

The Nyoongar start taking cattle and crops from white settlers in return for their hospitality, which leads to conflict in their clash with the Western concept of individual property and capitalist agriculture; this conflict becomes worse as resources grow scarce due to the mounting number of settlers and capitalist overexploitation. The abduction of Indigenous women and killing of their husbands by whalers and settlers lead to further problems. Imported illness and alcohol not only reduce Indigenous numbers but also severely affect the community fabric and crosscultural trust. Reminiscent yet critical of the manner in which Inga Clendinnen describes first contact in the Sydney area in *Dancing with Strangers* (2003)—Scott appears to be writing back to this evocative title—armed conflict is initially avoided by the police and military: “When their man was speared, Cross and his commander discussed whether to retaliate and agreed they must continue to demonstrate the difference between the sealers and themselves” (89).

Yet, firearms prove disastrous in the hands of white settlers who, in the purest Enlightenment tradition of progress, do not appreciate the Nyoongars as fellow humans. The likes of the self-made tradesman Chaine, the pilot-soldier Killam, and the convict Skelly—all supplied with surnames of a Dickensian symbolism: Chaine, released from British class constraints, is expansive in his ambitions; Killam (kill ‘em) has no trouble raising a rifle against the Indigenes; and Skelly (Scottish: skellum) is a hoodlum—are all men “on the make and no privilege of class would hinder here” (16). And so it is with race. White ‘ghosts’ that flesh out in country, they haunt and hunt the Indigenes, bring death, and take over (359), despite the presence of fair and open-minded settlers such as the surgeon Dr Cross, who insists upon being buried next to his Nyoongar guide and close friend Wunyeran, or the ship-jumping sailor Jack Tar, who lives with Bobby’s sister Binyan in happy marriage. The gory whaling scenes enact the destruction inflicted upon the Nyoongars, whose bones Bobby imagines mingling with the whale bones on the ocean floor (16), so forming the oppressive bedrock for the future Australian settler nation:

Bones from riverbanks washed down towards the sea [...] Did all those bones reach the sea and join a path of whalebones across the ocean floor? Or years later become part of the

foundations of the town hall and its clock with ticking faces looking north, south, east and west and, right at the very steeple top, that very great weight: a nation's fluttering flag? (356–357)

The Gothic has been a productive genre to articulate the colonial experience<sup>207</sup> and the last section of Scott's novel is full of images of death, decay, and destruction, most of them circling around the metaphor of pale whale bones after most whales—and Nyoongar—in the area have been hunted and killed by the Europeans, signaling the failure of Bobby's totemic powers in intercultural contact. As in Mudrooroo's *Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription*, in *That Deadman Dance* the colonial Gothic is postcolonially reversed with the arrival of ghostly pale men: the British convicts, military, and settlers, who bode disaster for the locals, offer a revelatory mirror perspective on the confrontation with the Other scripted as European. As in Mudrooroo's *Master of the Ghost Dreaming*, this inspires Bobby's version of the Deadman Dance, a performative adaptation to the new times which mimicks the gestures of military drill<sup>208</sup> and thus records as well as aims to incorporate the arrival of the white man into Nyoongar culture:

One day when Menak and his woman companion were leading the music, Bobby stepped out from among the others, stiff-limbed and moving jerkily to the sound of his own frightening whistle; a tune like the one we knew but different all the same. The singing began to copy this, and all the other men—even the Elder—started to copy his action, too, but then their minds went blank, their vision barren [...] Each man he [Bobby] touched lay down as if he was dead. Dead. People loved the experience of it. To have had no will of their own but only Bobby's, briefly. (69)

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<sup>207</sup> Gerry Turcotte, "Australian Gothic," in *The Handbook to Gothic Literature*, ed. Marie Mulvey-Roberts (London: Macmillan, 1998): 10.

<sup>208</sup> Scott, *That Deadman Dance*, 399. Further page references are in the main text. This rests on historical fact: Nyoongar dancing incorporated the military drills of Matthew Flinders' marines.

Bobby will perform this dance time and again throughout his life but the magic of ritual is not enough to control and contain the pale flood. Performed as a young man and tribal leader, Bobby's last dance before the highest local white authorities is a fiasco: "the terrible beauty of Bobby's spell had been broken" (377), and violent conquest has finally triumphed.

Bobby's last dance aims to make the settlers aware of their mistaken ways and their failure to abide by the laws of hospitality; it demands recognition and respect for Indigeneity in its sovereign connectedness to, and understanding of, place, "because you need to be inside the sound and spirit of it, to live here properly" (394). Yet, crucially, his performance is also connected to the rebellious James and Jeffrey, the two non-Indigenous black servants to the rich and extravagant Governor Spender, who are murdered by the wealthiest white parvenu in the novel, Chaine, which allows the latter to survive the bush (387). This unscrupulous killing—a fitting survival of the fittest—points forward to a settler history of genocidal takeover in the service of colonial exploitation, in which white is bluntly poised against black, so that "No one said Noongar no more; it was all blackfellas and whitefellas" (353). Identity is essentialized in a binary informing access to exploitable resources:

But Bobby knew old boss Chaine had his own laws. Chaine and them, they seemed to divide the world up into black and white people, and despite what they said, they put all black people together, and set to work making sure they put themselves in control, and put their own people over the top of all of us who've always been here. (362)

Bobby, who was the sole witness to the murder of James and Jeffrey, has to sign a document that obscures Chaine's crime so as to avoid his imprisonment for 'stealing' food, causing damage, and defying white authority—the same kind of accusations that led to the transport of so many of Britain's underclass from metropolitan prisons to Australia. The price for his collaboration in the covering up of the truth, his selling-out and loss of innocence, is paid with his power to convince the settlers. He is no longer in tune with the complexities of their behavior.

As the Noble Savage he stands and dances in Edenic near-nakedness before his audience in this crucial last performance, but he fails the first rule of civility newly imposed in the expanding settlement:

Laws were being enforced now, thankfully. Natives must be clothed and without spears if they were to enter town. It was only decent, and if we are to civilise them, as Papa [Chaine] said is the only way, then clothing is an important precursor. (367)

Thus, the white settlers, starting with Bobby's beloved and desired girlfriend, Christine, turn their back on him and blot Bobby out of their field of vision and experience, making Indigeneity invisible: "Suddenly, he felt no fear, but a terrible anxiety. Faces—other than those of Jak Tar and Binyan—had turned away from him" (395). What falls from white view is returned as the spectral—Bobby's dire ghostly image, a "well-dressed human form hovered on its toes in the corner of the room like a ghost, a silent witness, a hanging man; like all those things at once" (393). His last, wavering presence befits Turcotte's observation:

If it is true that the Gothic has been useful for helping to establish a local Australian voice, it has also functioned as a silencing discourse for some, such as the Aboriginal people of Australia.<sup>209</sup>

White blindness signifies Bobby's discursive death, and the takeover by European control and epistemology in transcultural matters. We see him back as an old man, recalling and retelling a long lost, spectral past to a non-Indigenous audience at several stages in the novel. He is no longer powerful and capable of convincing, but a clownesque relic of the passing of his people, addressing tourists from the discursive gap in the real that has ghosted the Nyoongars on Australian soil:

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<sup>209</sup> Turcotte, "Australian Gothic," 18.

Sometimes he would throw off his policeman's jacket and heavy boots and drape a kangaroo skin over his shoulders and—since they wanted a real old-time Aborigine, but not completely—wear the red underpants.<sup>210</sup>

His relegation to the realm of folklore and nostalgia is encapsulated in his wearing an old policeman's hat, which alludes to his name, to his former Law-invested mediating function, and to his assimilation to white sovereignty: "Bobby would get to know them well; too well, as many said."<sup>211</sup> Old Bobby's memories, now imbued with bitter experience, are juxtaposed to young Bobby's tale, which works as a first-contact account of human bliss in prelapsarian innocence. Scott celebrates the playful experimentation, open-mindedness, and generosity with which the locals receive the newcomers in their Antipodean homestead, and sets the reciprocity implied and required—but eventually betrayed and not returned by the European guests—in this act of hospitality by the traditional owners of the land as the model for future intercultural contact. The novel juxtaposes this transcultural model with the Fall: the loss of balanced relationships among people, fauna and flora, and the land, and the imposition of hierarchies and materialist commodification, with Nyoongar culture caught in the dead angle of the white gaze and considered passé.

### Postcolonial Insight

Scott's fiction moves out of the realm of the factual and controllable into a postcolonizing reinvention of Dreaming narrative. Crucially, Scott's conception of Indigeneity questions the Australian real's subjection to paradigmatic Western meaning and knowledge. Through the sacred Dreaming connection to the body as part of country, Indigenous embodiment confers truth value on matters intangible for and undetectable by the Western observer, and thus stretches Australianness beyond Western parameters. It is in

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<sup>210</sup> Scott, *That Deadman Dance*, 78.

<sup>211</sup> *That Deadman Dance*, 69.

acknowledging incommensurability, the existence of defamiliarizing universes of local embodiment that Australianness is rewritten in Scott's novels; not by the accumulation of knowledge but by the collusion of epistemological difference, as Alison Ravenscroft writes.<sup>212</sup> Thus, *True Country* reflects Scott's first, hesitant steps into Dreaming territory as a reflection on an unsuccessful attempt to establish his descent in Kimberley country, whereas *Benang* works his full-fledged anger at the damaging impact of the eugenicist project that threatened to sever him from his Indigenous roots, located in the south of Western Australia. After the beautifully written but convulsive and complex narrative of *Benang*, *That Deadman Dance* stands as a more accessible reflective engagement with country which highlights the communal sense of betrayal the Indigenous communities have felt in the reception of the British settlers now more than two centuries earlier.

In offering hospitality, exchange, and sharing to the settlers, *That Deadman Dance* projects a generous, inclusive view of Indigeneity that beckons toward mainstream reciprocity as a means to reconciliation, especially in its move to a wider community perspective. If Scott the storyteller has an alter ego in Bobby the trickster, dancer, and singer, he proves himself more skillful than his main character in his engagement with historical truth: *That Deadman Dance's* sad ending informs a recuperative political agenda and assigns responsibility and blame without lapsing into facile victimization or simplification, and therefore convinces.<sup>213</sup> Anne Brewster claims that *That Deadman Dance* represents "a discursive form of Noongar self-determination and agency"<sup>214</sup> which points to "the possibility of an alternative intercultural social contract [...] inflected with pessimism [...] by the novel's ending (63–64). Indeed, it is the episodes of old Bobby's clownesque y(e)arning and complaining to tourists (78) and the novel's final dance scene (390–395) that sound a warning: the text's most open-minded leader is

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<sup>212</sup> Ravenscroft, *The Postcolonial Eye*, 20.

<sup>213</sup> See Brewster, "Can You Anchor a Shimmering Nation State via Regional Indigenous Roots?" 231.

<sup>214</sup> Scott, *That Deadman Dance*, 68. Further page references are in the main text.

eventually ineffectual in the performance of crosscultural understanding.

What remains of a promising beginning between two cultures reimagined in playful contact and exchange is the betrayal of codes of conduct and trust on the part of Europeans known as *terra nullius*, which provided the Australian real with the haunting gap that questions European belonging. Through the nuances in Bobby's story, Scott avoids a black-and-white confrontation about the legal fiction of land that was found rather than emptied of prior human presence. As Scott suggests,

rather than buying into the polemic, let us insist on things like respect, reciprocity, the importance of continuity of place and relationships. Continuity of place I would argue—that's fundamental.<sup>215</sup>

If the novel contributes to mainstream Australia's acceptance of the Nyoongar truth of prior human occupation—and the Miles Franklin Awards for *Benang* and *That Deadman Dance* suggest that such a sensibility exists—it does so by describing and displaying a generously lived past prior to the fictions of European discourse: Australia was never a *terra nullius*, nor its original inhabitants subhuman, inhospitable, divested of sovereignty, or unwilling to share. These white fictions are now obsolete, and so are whitened readings of the Other: it is a strongly local, independent yet embracing sense of Indigeneity that Scott's writing advocates as Australianness and asks us to open our eyes/I's to.

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<sup>215</sup> Scott, quoted in Brewster, "Can You Anchor a Shimmering Nation State via Regional Indigenous Roots?" 241.



## 5

### “We’re of One Heartbeat”

#### *Alexis Wright’s Aboriginal Reality*

“I hope [Carpentaria] is of one heartbeat. Not only for us, but for everybody in Australia as we move towards the future and try to understand better”<sup>1</sup>

#### **Taking the Snake Out of the Hole**

As an Indigenous author, Alexis Wright (1950–) creates a sense of belonging by setting her writing in her traditional homeland. A generational peer of Sally Morgan (1951) but late to start publishing, she follows Kim Scott in resorting to fiction as a safer and more effective way of reflecting on issues of Indigeneity.<sup>2</sup> Invested with the wisdom of her Indigenous family and community, Wright is not interested in the personal search for Aboriginal identity that Morgan, Scott, and—in a warped sense—Mudrooroo embark upon but refuses its exposure to mainstream scrutiny, which she understands as invasive and harmful.<sup>3</sup> Instead, through the imaginative use of fiction she proposes the critical assessment of the general state of Indigeneity in contemporary Australia from the point of view of community and country. *Plains of Promise* is still tainted by “the focus [...] in much earlier Indigenous women’s fiction [...] on the secret of sexual abuse of Aboriginal women by white men, for which the

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<sup>1</sup> Alexis Wright, quoted in Kerry O’Brien, “Alexis Wright Interview,” *Hecate* 33.1 (2007): 218.

<sup>2</sup> Alison Ravenscroft, “Politics of Exposure: An Interview with Alexis Wright,” *Meridian* 17.1 (1998): 75.

<sup>3</sup> Ravenscroft, “Politics of Exposure,” 2.

former were treated as somehow responsible,"<sup>4</sup> according to Carole Ferrier, but this issue is addressed in the novel without any autobiographical references and disappears altogether from *Carpentaria*, whereas in *The Swan Book* the emphasis is on intraracial sexual violence.

As a fourth-generation victim of geographical displacement and dispossession, Wright grounds her political agenda and narrative strategies in an Indigenous ancestry and rootedness in traditional country that finds ample support in her own community but whose continuity is still challenged in contemporary mainstream society.<sup>5</sup> The shared history of oppression and genocide that informs contemporary Indigeneity is given shape through Wright's textual reflection of the communal universe of the Waanyi people and their epistemological bond with the Southern Gulf of Carpentaria in Northern Queensland, the land of their Dreaming. Thus, Wright says "*Plains of Promise* is in some ways my attempt to come to terms with my separation from the country, not that it's a story directly about me or my family."<sup>6</sup>

Yet, her family's experience of removal, dispossession, and expulsion locks into a broader agenda of Indigenous genocide and population control which determines the interplay between her

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<sup>4</sup> Carole Ferrier, "The Best Australian Novel for Years," *Australian Women's Book Review* 18.2 (2006): 45, <http://www.emsah.uq.edu.au/awsr/recent/> (accessed 9 September 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Neo-conservatives as well as the traditional left come to mind, who "are entrenched in Enlightenment ways of thinking about us as savages on the edge of civilisation"—see Marcia Langton, "Senses of Place: Fourth Overland lecture 2001," *Overland* (Autumn 2002): 75; see also Baden Offord, Erika Kerruish, Rob Garbutt, Adele Wessell & Kirsten Pavlovic, *Inside Australian Culture: Legacies of Enlightenment Values*, foreword by Ashis Nandy, afterword by Vinay Lay (London & New York: Anthem 2014), who would no doubt agree with her.

<sup>6</sup> Kieran Finnane, "Promises kept, promises broken," *Alice Springs News* (2 April 1997), <http://www.alicespringsnews.com.au/0409.html> (accessed 30 May 2005). CRA, now part of the multinational mining-giant Rio Tinto, is Australia's largest mining company, and one of the country's largest privately-owned corporations. It has a bad track record regarding Indigenous land rights—see "The Gulliver CRA Dossier," in *The Sustainable Energy & Anti-Uranium Service* (1992, 1997, 2008), <http://www.sea-us.org.au/gulliver/cra.html> (accessed 10 November 2008).

fictional imagination and firm political agenda, committed to Indigenous sovereignty as the power to govern their lands and their minds. Her grandmother's living memory told Alexis about a stolen homeland which the author could only experience and become closely acquainted with through the creative use of the imagination: "the Gulf of Carpentaria [...] is the place that I carry in my heart and learnt from a very early age from my grandmother's memories."<sup>7</sup> Through the awareness of dispossession, Wright learnt to reimagine the story of her family despite the politics of silence and shame that kept a veil over their past:

I learnt to imagine [...] the haunting memories of the impossible and frightening silence of family members. Throughout my life, I have learnt how to piece the mysteries together with gathered facts from historical records that have been revealed through anthropological, historical and family research. I can only now feel I can tell the story of our family revealing the voices of loved ones who never, ever told a story that they felt was too shameful to tell.<sup>8</sup>

In order to grasp the width and depth of the issues addressed in her three novels, it is useful to situate Alexis Wright in her own family background, which can only be understood within the larger framework of contact history with white settlers and the resulting disruption of the Indigenous tribal fabric through dispossession, removal, displacement, and genocide. Wright traces her lineage back to her great-grandmother, who lived on traditional land which was renamed and now known as Lawn Hills Station after colonialists had "illegally occupied" it. As a young girl, her great-grandmother was forcibly taken into the household of the white station owner Frank Hahn in 1881. This event should be placed within the nineteenth-century colonial growth of the pastoral industry in Queensland, which pushed local Aborigines, among them the Waanyi, off their

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<sup>7</sup> Alexis Wright, "Breaking Taboos," *Australian Humanities Review* 11 (September 1998), <http://www.lib.latrobe.edu.au/AHR/> (accessed 10 June 2005).

<sup>8</sup> Alexis Wright, "Politics of Writing," *Southerly* 62.2 (2002): 10.

traditional lands.<sup>9</sup> As his diary and other historical records testify, Frank Hahn was notorious for violent conduct against the Aborigines, and Wright does not think it unlikely that her forebear was abducted after Hahn had murdered her kin. Furthermore, Wright insinuates that Hahn used her teenage great-grandmother not only as a domestic but also as a sexual slave: "We also know that children were also taken for other purposes by these white men who didn't have wives with them." This frames her great-grandmother's abduction within the ignominious practice of 'black velvet.'<sup>10</sup>

In time, Hahn passed Wright's great-grandmother, Opal Marinmarn, on to his cook, a Chinese laborer who had originally immigrated to work in the local mining industry. The Chinese had become an abundant presence in the Gulf Country, together with other Pacific and Asian men who were attracted by a wide array of budding economic activities on Australia's north coast.<sup>11</sup> This led to a large number of more and less formalized bonds with Indigenous women, into which Wright's family branch was also incorporated. Indeed, Sam Ah Bow and Opal married, presumably to ward off the effects of the Queensland Aboriginal Protection Act,<sup>12</sup> which turned

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<sup>9</sup> Anna Haebich speaks of the Stolen Generations as "the common practices of segregation, removal, institutionalisation, indenturing, fostering and adoption of Aboriginal children"; "Between knowing and not knowing': Public knowledge of the Stolen Generations," *Aboriginal History* 24 (2000): 70. There is an ongoing, unbroken link between the Stolen Generations as an institutional policy and the unofficial, habitual abduction of Aboriginal children on the local level in years preceding the official policy, as the case of Wright's family line shows. Child removal was embedded in an interlocking series of genocidal practices against the Natives such as murder, family rupture, dispossession, and displacement dating back to the earliest days of settlement, causing trauma to be passed on from generation to generation.

<sup>10</sup> Jean-François Vernay, "An Interview with Alexis Wright," *Antipodes* 18.2 (Dec. 2004): 119. Sally Morgan's (auto)biography pivots on the practice of black velvet; Wright also presents it as a key issue in understanding the female protagonists' plight in *Plains of Promise*.

<sup>11</sup> Regina Ganter, "Living an Immoral Life—'Coloured' Women and the Paternalistic State," *Hecate* 24 (1998): 18. South Sea Islanders were known as "Kanaka" in Australia. They were often indentured or, worse, worked in conditions of slavery after having been kidnapped or 'blackbirded', as this was called.

<sup>12</sup> The Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897 and its 1901 amendment.

Opal and their abundant offspring into wards of state, with the implied risk of removal and deportation. Their marriage in 1898 was timely, as in Queensland:

By 1901, significant advances had been made in Aboriginal administration by means of an impressive efficient network of reporting through ten local Protectors, powers to remove Aboriginal persons to missions and reserves, and supervision of employment by means of a permit [...] the Aboriginal Protection bureaucracy [...] made it its task to decide in each case whether a marriage was morally desirable.<sup>13</sup>

The desirability of their marital union was all the more under scrutiny because, as an Asian, Sam was subject to the White Australia Policy, another legal measure to impose a neat racial stratification on Australian society; this immigration law limited Asian-Pacific access to the island-continent and ran in parallel with the white aim to curb the presence of the Indigenous population. This may have contributed to Sam's disrupting the family and sending most of the marriage's offspring back to China, while he only allowed the youngest two girls—among them Wright's grandmother—to stay after Opal's insistent pleading.<sup>14</sup>

Mixed marriages of Sam and Opal's kind and their prolific, so-called 'coloured' issue were consistently seen as a serious threat by the small numbers of Queensland's turn-of-the-twentieth-century mainstream society, which was deeply worried about and obsessed with maintaining whiteness as the primary means of access to economic resources. Families such as those of Alexis Wright's direct forebears posed a "problem" that would be typically voiced in terms of "deviant morality":

Under the spotlight of administrative reasoning, normal behaviour became suspect [...] The concern over the moral conduct of the Australian-born coloured population of mixed

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<sup>13</sup> Ganter, "Living an Immoral Life," *Hecate* 24 (1998): 14, 17.

<sup>14</sup> Vernay, "An Interview," *Antipodes* 18.2 (December 2004): 119. Wright, "A Family Document," 230.

Indigenous descendants emanated as if naturally from the xenophobic attitudes towards Asians, many of whom shared with Indigenous Australians the customs of polygyny and promised marriages. Associations between Indigenous women and Asian men, which often followed such customs, were considered pernicious and immoral. The result was that much of the Aboriginal protection legislation was framed with Asians firmly in mind.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, mainstream policies would necessarily and directly affect Wright's forebears. Wright's maternal grandmother, whose ambiguous inscription in Australian society is reflected in her triple naming as Dolly Quinsen, Granny Ah Kup, and Grandma Nulayanma,<sup>16</sup> was born on the traditional land of Lawn Hills Station and married out by her father to another Chinese man, Johnny Ah Kup. While Opal and Dolly maintained their connection to their traditional country thanks to a lease Sam Ah Bow had bought on a parcel of Law Hills Station, these rights were forfeited on his demise and deemed untransferable to his family "under White man's law."<sup>17</sup> Moreover, in an act that structurally links racism and access to economic resources, the local creek which supplied water to the lease had probably been diverted by a competing white settler so as to crush their life-supporting vegetable-garden business. Finally,

The family were under regular surveillance from Mr Thornton, Protector of the Aborigines at Gregory Downs who, according to official correspondence, did not have a high regard for Johnny Ah Kup, whom he opportunely accused of being a liar, selling his daughters and harbouring Aborigines and undesirables.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ganter, "Living an Immoral Life," *Hecate* 24 (1998): 36.

<sup>16</sup> Alexis Wright, "One Hundred Millenniums Plus Two—Maintaining Traditional Indigenous Geographies: Minus Two Centuries of Lost Life in the Geography of Australian Ignorance," in *Changing Geographies: Essays on Australia*, ed. Susan Ballyn et al. (Barcelona: Centre d'Estudis Australians, Universitat de Barcelona, 2001): 224, 239.

<sup>17</sup> Vernay, "An Interview with Alexis Wright," 119.

<sup>18</sup> Wright, "One Hundred Millenniums Plus Two," 232–233.

As his and Dolly's eleven children were under official consideration for deportation, this caused the family to move away to Cloncurry in the mid-1930s, where Wright's "poor Mum lived smack bang in the horror of the assimilation era of small town, North-West Queensland."<sup>19</sup>

Small-town Cloncurry is the oppressive environment in which Alexis was born in 1950. The slow family experience of removal, dispossession, and expulsion locked into a wider agenda of Indigenous genocide and restrictive immigration policies determines the interplay of her fictional imagination and firm political agenda. The path she followed to become a writer was against all odds, as she "never received [an education] as a child in the backwaters of small-town bigotry and stereotyping Indigenous children to become failures right from the moment we first walked into the classroom."<sup>20</sup> However, as her "main guide, nurturer and guardian was my grandmother [...] the person I had always turned to, ran away to, loved to be with, whom I felt gave me solace and space to daydream as a child,"<sup>21</sup> she was imbued with Dolly's love for storytelling and country, which she would later put to use as a writer of fiction. Moreover, her grandmother "was what *not forgetting* was all about" and her living memory told Alexis about a country that "had been stolen from us," which the author could only become acquainted with through creative use of her imagination:

I set my writing in my own traditional country which is in the Gulf of Carpentaria. This is where I believe I belong and the place that I know best; it is the place that I carry in my heart and learnt from a very early age from my grandmother's memories. We have very little land rights over our traditional country. The pastoral properties over our traditional domain are owned by a mining company and subleased to the previous owner, an absentee, overseas landlord. The gates to the pastoral properties remain locked. Most of our people

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<sup>19</sup> Wright, "One Hundred Millenniums Plus Two," 224.

<sup>20</sup> Wright, "Politics of Writing," 11.

<sup>21</sup> Wright, "One Hundred Millenniums Plus Two," 224.

have to live outside, most in former reserves and missions. Our language will die soon if we cannot get the last speakers back on traditional country to live in order to teach the children.<sup>22</sup>

It was only her activist years, during which she worked extensively in government departments and Indigenous agencies across four states and the Northern Territory, that prompted her to pursue her literary calling through media studies and creative writing courses.<sup>23</sup> Thus, Alexis Wright's incursions into writing have developed out of a matrilineal heritage of myth, memory, and storytelling and a long-standing professional commitment to the Indigenous cause which respond to an agenda of recovery, self-determination, and sovereignty:

the true guidance from the senior holders of traditional law in our Waanyi homelands is our inheritance. If we are to survive, their law should flow down to all of us, so that every Waanyi has the opportunity to learn more about our traditional domain and be given the opportunity to take up the responsibilities for country that flows from residing within our ancient boundaries. In the end, it will be from the inclusion of the skills and potential of all Waanyi that our nation and homelands will survive and grow in a positive way.<sup>24</sup>

Wright's writing aims to participate in this process of recovery, and so, between 1997 and 1998, she emerged powerfully onto the Australian writing scene with the publication of two nonfiction works, *Grog War*<sup>25</sup> and *Take Power: Like This Old Man Here*,<sup>26</sup> and the

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<sup>22</sup> Wright, "Breaking Taboos."

<sup>23</sup> Wright, "Politics of Writing," 11.

<sup>24</sup> Alexis Wright, "A Family Document," in *Storykeepers*, ed. Marion Halligan (Sydney: Duffy & Snellgrove, 2001): 240.

<sup>25</sup> Alexis Wright, *The Grog War* (Broome, WA: Magabala, 1997).

<sup>26</sup> *Take Power: Like This Old Man Here*, ed. Alexis Wright (Alice Springs, NT: IAD Press, 1998).



novel *Plains of Promise*.<sup>27</sup> Following Indigenous protocol regarding traditional ownership as guardianship, the author wrote *Grog War* and *Take Power* upon an invitation issued by other local Indigenous organizations to deal with socio-political issues relating to their communities.<sup>28</sup> *Grog War* was commissioned by the Julalikari Council for the Warumungu people of Tennant Creek in the Northern Territory, and documents their successful bid for Indigenous self-management of the alcohol problem that threatened to devastate the community in the 1990s. Michèle Grossman describes *Grog War* as "a groundbreaking materialist study" which charts "the vested interests of white Territorians for whom the economic exploitation of local Indigenous peoples has been a long-standing feature of social and political profiteering."<sup>29</sup> In language that homes in on the uncanny, Wright considers *Grog War* a "hidden history" of "angry hornets inside Pandora's box,"<sup>30</sup> which defamiliarizes white versions of contact history. For its part, *Take Power* is a compilation of essays and stories in commemoration of twenty years of land rights struggle in Central Australia, edited by the author for the Central Australian Land Council, which puts on paper a series of accounts for which fellow Indigenous people "were not able to find the words."<sup>31</sup>

Creative writing is already tentatively engaged with in *Grog War*. It mixes "factual account [...] with the story of a fictional Aboriginal family"<sup>32</sup> so as to offer protection to the Indigenous community and not to disrupt any further the already tense crosscultural relations between white and black locals.<sup>33</sup> Fiction therefore seems a logical step into a more accurate, confrontative, and effective way of communicating an Indigenous sense of history, place, and identity to the Indigenous community and the dominant culture:

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<sup>27</sup> Alexis Wright, *Plains of Promise* (St Lucia: U of Queensland P, 1997).

<sup>28</sup> Wright, "Breaking Taboos."

<sup>29</sup> Michèle Grossman, "Reach On Out to the Other Side: *Grog War* and *Plains of Promise*," *Meridian* 17.1 (1998): 82-83.

<sup>30</sup> O'Brien, "Alexis Wright Interview," 219.

<sup>31</sup> Wright, "Breaking Taboos."

<sup>32</sup> Wright, *The Grog War*, ix.

<sup>33</sup> Wright, "Breaking Taboos."

I felt literature, the work of fiction, was the best way of presenting a truth—not the real truth, but more of truth than non-fiction, which is not really the truth either. *Non-fiction is often about the writer telling what is safe to tell* [...] I use literature to try and create a truer replica of reality [...] To me, fiction penetrates more than the surface layers, and probes deep into the inner workings of reality [...] I felt fiction would allow me to create some kind of testament, not the actual truth, but a good portrayal of the truth which I see, and that is the living hell of the lives of many Aboriginal people.<sup>34</sup>

Wright highlights how the process of obtaining native title is more problematic in Queensland than elsewhere<sup>35</sup> and laments the difficulties involved in retrieving traditional country and the lack of local means of sustenance, worsening Indigenous welfare dependency.<sup>36</sup> Wright's fiction therefore inscribes itself in the recovery of a kind of spiritual and intellectual native title that has little in common with depoliticized New Age philosophies of a healing reconnection between human beings and country. Rather, it is wrapped up in a political project of revealing silenced, hidden knowledge regarding Indigenous dispossession and genocide whose potentially harmful effect on the Indigenous community is thrown back in the face of the mainstream. By addressing, denouncing, and discomfiting the dominant culture with silenced historical truth enhanced by the creative imagination, the Indigenous community is offered the possibility of its controlled use and management.

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<sup>34</sup> Wright, "Politics of Writing," 13–15 (emphasis added).

<sup>35</sup> The historian Anna Haebich corroborates the resistance of successive Queensland governments to introduce less repressive policies regarding its Aboriginal population, pointing out that by 1951, "New South Wales, Western Australia and South Australia had adopted the policy, Victoria and Tasmania had few formal barriers to assimilation [...] By contrast Queensland resisted assimilation until the early 1960s and maintained discriminatory laws and practices into the 1980s"; Haebich, *Spinning the Dream: Assimilation in Australia 1950–1970* (Fremantle, WA: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2008): 198.

<sup>36</sup> Jean-François Vernay, "An Interview with Alexis Wright," *Antipodes* 18.2 (December 2004): 119.

Wright's bid for fiction calls to mind Freud's belief in the increased possibility for the uncanny to appear in this realm.<sup>37</sup> As Wright says,

writing is like taking the snake out of the hole. The snake that has killed, maimed and stolen [...] It is about dragging our memories, realities and losses back up to the surface and letting the whole world see them in the full, glaring light of day.<sup>38</sup>

Within this uncanny agenda, *Plains of Promise* marked Wright's first full-fledged incursion into the genre of the novel, this example of which met with mixed reviews on its publication in 1997.

### **A Torn Homeland: Plains of Promise or Papery Grass?**

*Plains of Promise* reads as a general metaphor for the potential for Indigenous survival in contemporary Australia. It does not directly deal with Wright's family history, although one may detect its pulse in the background of the bleak fictional universe of isolation and separation from traditional country that the novel configures.<sup>39</sup> *Plains of Promise* traces the lives of three generations of Indigenous 'half-caste' women from the 1940s to the 1990s in light of their Dreaming connection with the nurturing core of the Gulf Country in Northern Queensland. As may be expected, the novel investigates the damaging effects of a rupture of this epistemological bond. In what turns out to be a female family saga of territorial, physical, and emotional dis/possession, Wright considers the uncanny mappings of race across gender and class through the removal, enslavement, and fostering out of women of mixed Indigenous ancestry:

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<sup>37</sup> See Chapter 1.

<sup>38</sup> Wright, "Politics of Writing," 18.

<sup>39</sup> *Plains of Promise* does make general comments on the presence of Chinese-Aboriginal families in the Gulf area, and also denounces the abduction of Aboriginal women by white settlers in terms reminiscent of the fate befalling Wright's great-grandmother—see Wright, *Plains of Promise*, 13–14.

I was concerned with what happens when you cannot crawl out of the pile at the bottom of the barrel. What happens when you are an outcast in mainstream society because you are black, and you have become, for some reason or another, stigmatised, an outcast in your own society? How do you cope?<sup>40</sup>

The title *Plains of Promise* therefore ironically plays on the first white settlers' perception of the Gulf of Carpentaria as a paradisiacal, bountiful place against the connotations of decimation, expulsion, and destruction it has held for the Indigenous communities who have traditionally inhabited this domain.<sup>41</sup> Starting the narrative with a nameless mother, the possibilities for Indigenous recovery and survival in the face of various forms of Indigenous genocide are traced through the eventful lives of Ivy Koopundi, her daughter Mary Koopundi/Nelson/Doolan, and her granddaughter Jessie Doolan. Their plight is magnified by their being the unknowing bearers of a powerful Dreaming secret that has been transmitted along the female family line from generation to generation. A biblical embodiment of the eternal struggle between good and evil forces itself quite naturally upon the reader, who will no doubt see the link between these three Indigenous characters and their Christian namesakes Eve, Mary, and Jesus. Wright plays on this allusion as if to defy the biblical truth and promise of salvation transmitted through the novel's central location of St Dominic's Mission, built on Indigenous Gulf land. Wright problematizes the role of gender in a politics of Indigenous survival by proffering Jessie as a dark female, incarnation of the savior, equally and uncannily perceived as the devil, while critically engaging with issues of responsibility, blame, and guilt in the process of hybridization through the Stolen Generations.

As the novel deals with "ostracization, the idea of being an outcast in a non-indigenous world but also an outcast in the community,"<sup>42</sup> its end appears to offer little hope for the future. Indeed, the brief, precarious reunion of Ivy, Mary, and Jessie on the dry and barren

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<sup>40</sup> Wright, "Breaking Taboos."

<sup>41</sup> Vernay, "An Interview with Alexis Wright," 121.

<sup>42</sup> "An Interview with Alexis Wright," 121.

"plains of papery grasses"<sup>43</sup> of the Gulf Country is inscribed in failure. The cycle of displacement, isolation, and loss of identity that underscores the solitary lives of these three women of mixed ancestry apparently comes full circle in Mary and Jessie's premature eviction from their ancestral country. However, this sad, dead-end finale is unsettled by an opaque, ambiguous Dreaming story of origins and cyclical regeneration on the very last pages, which fits in with the resurgence of a dry lake that represents the spiritual and geographical heart of the women's country. Indeed, it represents country as women's realm, bearing on the intimate link between the earth and female body in terms of fertility, reproduction, and the chance of survival; as such, it competes with the biblical, patriarchal account of Eve's sin and her expulsion from sacred ground.

Wright contextualizes the emotional and political drift of her first novel within the frustrating struggle for Indigenous land rights in the 1990s, which was compounded by the inner division of the Indigenous communities and the mainstream's "ingrained, inherited racism," which turned writing into "a way of consoling myself in this crisis of the mind to the very real threat we were facing as Waanyi people. I had hoped to achieve some recognition for our land,"<sup>44</sup> through political activism but in vain. The Indigenous expectations raised by the advent of the new native title legislation—which had tentatively promised a wholesome reconnection of the Indigenous Australians to country—and the ways in which its impact was curbed, especially with the advent of conservative federal tenure in 1996, proved to be far too high, and Wright's personal perception of the state of Indigeneity and its political context in that decade is bleakly pessimistic. When reality fails, may the fictional universe hold an alternative promise, or is the novel's vision of the future as troubled as the author's? How is one to cope with the text's disturbing content?

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<sup>43</sup> Wright, *Plains of Promise*, 247. "Plains of Papery Grass" is also the title of the final chapter of the novel (further references to *Plains of Promise* in section 2 by page numbers only).

<sup>44</sup> Wright, "Politics of Writing," 12.

### Ivy: Poison or Antidote?

While Indigenous epistemology foregrounds the nurturing interconnection between the Australian land and its flora, fauna, and Indigenous peoples,<sup>45</sup> in *Plains of Promise* nature conveys somber connotations for the Indigenous community, in disquieting images that alienate it from country. Imported trees are a recurrent dark symbol of Western imposition and disruption in the novel; thus, “a charred skeleton tree, once a giant cedar” at the Kennedy’s Station in Ivy’s traditional country hints at the Indigenous family’s adaptation to white society.<sup>46</sup> Thus, *Plains of Promise*’s gloomy arboreal opening also emphasizes how Indigenous society is out of place/sync. The largest tree in the mission compound, situated next to the girl’s territory, is a foreign species imported by the first white missionaries into the Gulf Country (1). Originally from Madagascar, the Poinciana tree is considered invasive because its dense foliage and root system pushes out other, Indigenous flora. Thus, the novel develops its first image of nature into a dramatic metaphor of pervasive despair:

The Aboriginal inmates believed the tree should not have been allowed to grow there on their ancestral country. It was wrong. Their spiritual ancestors grew more and more disturbed by the thirsty, greedy foreign tree intruding into the bowels of their land. The uprising fluid carried away precious nutrients; in the middle of the night they woke up gasping for air, thought they were dying. (1–2)

The vampiric quality of the tree, which sucks away the life-sustaining connection between humans, the land, and the spirit world, is underscored by its lonely inhabitant, a black crow acting as the

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<sup>45</sup> See Deborah Bird Rose, “An Indigenous Philosophical Ecology: Situating the Human,” *Australian Journal of Anthropology* 16.3 (2005): 294–305; and Deborah Bird Rose, *Nourishing Terrains: Australian Aboriginal View of Landscape and Wilderness* (Commonwealth of Australia, 1996), <http://www.ahc.gov.au/publications/generalpubs/nourishing/index.html> (accessed 2 September 2008).

<sup>46</sup> Wright, *Plains of Promise*, 68; see also 163 and 199. Further page references are in the main text.

uncanny harbinger of death. The bird's presence ties in with a setting that maps race across gender in stunting ways for the young Indigenous girls in the mission barracks, and bodes little hope for the future of the mission mob.

As an outcast among the already marginalized, Ivy Koopundi epitomizes the harrowing sense of disruption among this community of Indigenes, haphazardly driven together from different tribal areas and forced to live under the rules and regulations of white law and religion. Ivy's hybrid body denotes dispossession through the practice of 'black velvet', which to the Indigenes translates as her possession by the dark powers she has allegedly inherited from her nameless Indigenous mother. The latter, a "crazy woman from another country [with] 'that look' in her eye" (7), ends up in a suicidal frenzy after the half-caste Ivy has been separated from her in the mission compound. Her mother's self-immolation results from the race and gender oppression of the Indigenous underclass in white Australia, which allows white men to use Indigenous women for sexual pleasure without assuming any responsibility for them or their offspring. As we have seen in Sally Morgan's *My Place*, the mere possibility of 'black velvet' is facilitated by the common practice and later policy of removing children from their Indigenous families and inserting them in the white settler family economy at the frontier, either as station hands or as domestics. Taken out of the protective sphere of her Indigenous kin, Ivy's unnamed mother must submit to sexual abuse on the part of a white predator but is unable to ward off the shame and rejection this and her pregnancy generate in her and her Indigenous peers. Indeed, she is wrongly blamed for the damage inflicted upon her by white society:

At the end of the shearing station she was left to give birth alone, as despised as any other 'general gin' who disgraced herself by confusing lust for kindness and kindness for love. Years later, when the child Ivy was half-grown, the woman had to be got rid of [...] It was said that none of her own people wanted anything to do with her. She was too different, having grown up away from the native compound in the whitefellas' household. And having slept with white men [...] "that makes black women like that really uppity," they said. (12)

Ivy's mother's suicide is staged in the uncanny terrain of the Dreaming as nightmarish visitations of a violently attacking crow which 'sings' her feelings of guilt into madness and death. Her suicidal 'sickness' (15) sparks off a long series of self-immolations among the highly fragmented and weakened Indigenous mob living in the insalubrious, profoundly alienating conditions of the mission compound which defy original tribal structure (11). The community accuse Ivy of instigating the uncontrollable downward spiral of self-destruction and associate her, as "the crow's timekeeper" (22), with evil and death.

Ivy's marginalization, ostracization, and physical and sexual abuse prompt Michèle Grossman to write that the novel investigates the pernicious effects of the "politics of blame":

*Plains of Promise* foregrounds the manner in which the various forms of anguish—emotional, corporeal, cultural—that beset not only the lives of each of these women, but also their (obscured or severed) connections with one another, can be all too easily lost or papered over.<sup>47</sup>

Blame is transgenerational and ingrained in *Plains of Promise*, in that it triggers off the same racial and gendered violence which defeated her mother. A solitary, vulnerable yet attractive adolescent, she is easy prey for the depredations of the sexually-deprived missionary and local Protector Errol Jipp, but in a perverse reversal of agency is accused of this 'seduction' which results in pregnancy. As Ivy has plucked the forbidden apple of carnal knowledge with the Other, the mission mob accuse her of plunging the community into destruction. Ivy becomes the racialized version of the biblical Eve by an appropriation of misogynist Christian spirituality to the Dreaming. Ivy's racial 'dilution', identitarian dispossession, and promiscuous sexuality fold into an overpowering "evil" force<sup>48</sup> whose destructive powers cannot be curbed by the community. 'Poison Ivy' occupies a disturbing liminal area of racial and gendered identity that the

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<sup>47</sup> Grossman, "Reach On Out to the Other Side," 84–85.

<sup>48</sup> Wright, *Plains of Promise*, 22–23.



community can only manage by her violent expulsion from St Dominic's warped Garden of Eden. She spends more than two decades in a distant mental asylum belonging to the mission order, where she disappears into a "massive sulk [...] trying to find a missing person: herself."<sup>49</sup> The attempt to reinstate racial and gendered binaries in the mission space is further underscored by the fostering out of Mary, the forbidden hybrid fruit<sup>50</sup> of Ivy's sexual intercourse with the missionary.

### Elliot: Law-Abiding or Defying?

The uncanny operates in manifold ways at St Dominic's, notorious among Gulf Indigenes as the "place of evil" whence "suicides spread throughout the Aboriginal world."<sup>51</sup> The mission authorities refuse to understand that the disruption is caused by the Indigenes' displacement from their traditional homelands and regrouping into an artificial mob of unaffiliated strangers:

In the 1950s St Dominic's became the place people most feared being sent to. A place of death. The elders kept the lid on the business. They knew it was some dangerous business associated with the death of Ivy's mother. Real grounds for fear existed. (6-7)

Consequently, church ritual is ineffective and unable to gloss over the underlying issue of dispossession, whose disruptive effects manifest themselves in Indigenous sickness and mortality, and interrogate the Christian framework of spiritual healing. Therefore, unknown to and hidden from the mission authorities, a council of Indigenous elders has been constituted out of tribal fragments at the mission to constrain Ivy's 'evil' powers. It is a desperate effort to recover the tradition and so ensure material and cultural survival. An alternative

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<sup>49</sup> Wright, *Plains of Promise*, 167.

<sup>50</sup> To follow the terms of racial assimilation addressed in *Benang*, with Mary racial absorption increases from 'half-caste' to 'quadroon', as does indentitarian 'loss'.

<sup>51</sup> Wright, *Plains of Promise*, 37. Further page references are in the main text.

center of power, the council's existence is illegal under the provisions of the Aboriginal Protection Act, which inscribes Indigenes as wards of state. Thus, secrecy about its actions is required at all times to avoid harmful penalization of the Indigenous community (6–7). The almost insurmountable complexities the council faces while trying not to involve the mission authorities are shown in their need

to mediate the perpetual disputes between local estates and family groups; not their traditional boundaries this time, but the complex nature of how to translate these time immemorial boundaries into the confines of their present circumstances. (41)

This confusion necessarily unsettles the task of Elliot Pugnose, the law-abiding emissary who is to travel in secret to Ivy's homeland in search of a solution for the long years of mission mishaps.

As nature dies off along his songline into Ivy's homeland, Elliot becomes convinced that the elders are misled by Christian spirituality and have sent him out as a 'sacrificial lamb' to redeem his people from Ivy's evil powers. Elliot's spiritual transformation can be taken into a Christian context, as his name is a diminutive of the biblical preacher Elias, a Latin spelling of the Jewish name Elijah, meaning 'Jehovah is my God'. According to biblical accounts, the prophet Elijah was in constant conflict with secular and religious authorities and condemned to homeless wandering for defending his God. Thus, Elijah is considered one of the Messiah's forerunners, and in the New Testament Jesus is often confused with Elijah returned from the dead. Many of these features are reflected in Elliot, suggesting that he is a kind of savior in possession of a greater truth.<sup>52</sup> In the Bible, Elijah, who allegedly lived in the ninth century BC, predicts a fatally destructive drought to King Ahab of Israel for antagonizing and not worshipping God.<sup>53</sup> Elliott sees the mission

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<sup>52</sup> See "Elijah," in *Illustrated Dictionary & Concordance of the Bible* (Jerusalem Publishing House 1986; Answers.com, 2009), <http://www.answers.com/topic/elijah> (accessed 21 July 2009).

<sup>53</sup> See *King James Bible* (University of Michigan Library 18 February 1997): Old Testament, 1 Kings 17:1, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/k/kjv/about.html> (accessed 12 Jan. 2009).

elders enact a similar lack of allegiance to the Dreaming, with disastrous results. The dismal sight of the dried-up great lake confirms Elliot's worst suspicions of his own and community's impending end:

He realised his death was close when he came upon the mountain of dead pelicans stacked one on top of the other in the centre of the lake, the last waterhole—a pool of drying mud. Thousands of gaping mouths flung open in a final bid to find water before they perished. Escape was impossible [...] Elliot slipped into unconsciousness.<sup>54</sup>

Yet, Elliot's epic journey into death (country) develops into a physical and spiritual rebirth through the return of water to the lake, which reveals the true significance of the location to him and turns him against the Council's authority: "He had won over the dominance of St Dominic's and its ability to reshape mind. He could now rejoin the deeper world of his birthright" (82). Secret-Sacred knowledge is released in Elliot's "recovery from [his] clash with death" (83), which is reminiscent of Billy's initiation in Kim Scott's *True Country*. Elliot finds confirmation of this revelation in the ritual that takes place on Ivy's people's dancing ground for the swarms of birds that have returned to reclaim the lake (86). Its validity is further strengthened by word from a Chinese go-between that Ivy be returned to her homeland so as to re-establish her mob's epistemological bond with country (92–93).

On his return to St Dominic's in 1958, conflict between Elliot and the elders comes to a head. In a desperate attempt to control both Ivy and Elliot, who they now think is "a bighead" (125), the elders plan their "incongruous" union in wedlock, which they hope will ward off further evil:

The marriage would serve its purpose and provide the key to the future. The track whence evil came would be closed. People would know there was still honour and strength in the Council of Elders. (125–126)

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<sup>54</sup> Wright, *Plains of Promise*, 77–79. Further page references are in the main text.

Yet, its effects are even more disruptive. Elliot's sexual and physical abuse of his imposed spouse, "the booby prize" for his efforts, on the wedding night maps racial disruption across domestic violence.<sup>55</sup> Ivy's Gothic rape is on a par with the gruesome murder of the Chinaman, whose reasons and perpetrators remain troublingly unknown. No doubt due to his freedom to travel,<sup>56</sup> empathy with the Australian land, and understanding of the Indigenous "culture of traditional ownership,"<sup>57</sup> the Chinaman is chosen by the Council to return Ivy to her homeland, but this plan is thwarted by his death. The site where his body is found the day after Christmas paints a gory, Gothic picture of foreboding:

This was Boxing Day. It was breathlessly hot by ten in the morning, when the body of the Chinaman, Pilot Ah King, was found in the bridal suite, hanging by his broken neck from a low branch among the thorns of the prickly pear tree. His body was trapped in a snare of straggly undergrowth and covered with flies. The badly lacerated body had to be roughly pulled out of the thorns and buried immediately, without formalities, before the blood dripping out of the torn body even had time to dry. (132)

Disturbingly, the location of the killing is the exact place where Elliot first took Ivy, which triggers off a series of speculations on the part of the reader. If Elliot *is* responsible for the murder, Old Dorrie's snake magic, which forced him to marry Ivy, may have caused him to retaliate against the Chinaman, who as a snake-oil man and doctor was in contact with sacred tribal knowledge and power. On the other hand, Elliot may have exercised his patriarchal rights as Ivy's husband, due to not having been informed of the council's stratagem.

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<sup>55</sup> "Hours went by, it seemed, with no reference to love or affection from either the man or the woman The only words Elliot spoke were violent threats to induce encouragement whenever he moved his teeth from biting into the closed, bloody lips or swollen nipples of his pregnant wife" (128–129).

<sup>56</sup> The Chinese did not need a travel permit under the existing legislation, unlike people classified as Aboriginal.

<sup>57</sup> Wright, *Plains of Promise*, 138. Further page references are in the main text.

Yet, Elliot denies being responsible for the murder, and would obviously be interested in Ivy's disappearance to resume his affair with his lover, Ivy's pretty cousin Gloria. Additionally, it is unclear how to interpret why the killing presumably required joint forces. The latter might suggest that the elders were unable to overcome divergent group interests and fragmentation, and disagreed about Ivy's marriage and removal. The Chinaman's name, Pilot Ah King, is indicative of his multicultural go-between status, and the notion of cultural trespassing he embodies might not have sat well with purists among the fragmentary mission mob, thus triggering off his murder.

Pilot's wandering ghost reveals the challenging complexity but not the workings of the Indigenous universe: "*Draw no simple conclusions my friend. All are implicated*" (140, Wright's italics). Without clear answers, the unsettling sensation dawns that Western schemes of interpretation come to nothing. The mainstream reader simply lacks the information to make sense of events, and the closest s/he comes to an understanding of this episode is encapsulated in the Chinaman's last words. If anything, by now Elliot's controversial status within the community has fully surfaced. Can Elliot presume to be better qualified than the council to act upon the mission's troubles due to the sacred knowledge gathered on his walkabouts to the great lake? Or is his rebellious behavior simply symptomatic of a profound disruption of a tribal issue that defies and disables traditional structures of authority and knowledge?

All in all, the uncanny operates through the impossibility to explain events within a Western rationale, which alienates non-Indigenous readers from this crucial event in the novel and leaves them with a desolate image of gratuitous violence. Here, the uncanny effect obtains "in a structure which can never be subjected to any definitive kind of verification," as Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs argue.<sup>58</sup> Traditional plot lines expect a resolution in terms of clear cause and effect, but no such pattern develops in this Indigenous murder mystery. The lay preacher Jimbo Delainy, significantly Old Dorrie's renegade son, foregrounds the latter issue by suggesting that white law solve the Chinaman's murder. However, the Council counters:

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<sup>58</sup> Ken Gelder & Jane Jacobs, *Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity in a Postcolonial Nation* (Melbourne: Melbourne UP, 1998): 26.

This is the Law, you fool [...] You are looking at the true Law, your Government, right here. For this land and our people there is only one Law and this is it.<sup>59</sup>

This lack of mutual acknowledgement would reword the problem as follows: how can an empowering notion of Indigenous identity and belonging reinstate itself within Indigenous communities in the face of Indigenous/non-Indigenous incommensurability? The novel's plot focus on the ostracized Koopundi family line suggests that the key is to be found in the elusive role played by the Indigenous Trinity of Ivy, Mary, and Jessie.

### **The Female Indigenous Trinity: Problem or Solution?**

The policy of child removal sees a lasting separation of Ivy and Mary Koopundi, who, having lived a white suburban existence on the distant southern seaboard, are thoroughly westernized. The focus on Ivy's stolen child shifts the search for Indigenous identity and empowerment to the contemporary urban setting in an uncanny quest for hidden, potentially harmful knowledge. A solitary outsider aware of her racial difference, Mary is in search of her Indigenous origins, whose "traces [...] had been removed from official documentation" (209) but were revealed to her by her deceased white foster parents.

In what may be a subtle intertextual reference to the publication date of *My Place* and its controversial inscription of Indigenous identity, it is only at the time of the Bicentennial that Mary finds such an opportunity through her emotional and professional involvement in pan-Indigenous politics. The novel refuses a comforting identification between Mary and Indigeneity, and thus, by extension, excludes the reader from accommodating forms of Reconciliation that *My Place* supposedly provides. Rather, the text takes issue with Mary's received form of Indigeneity by deromanticizing her quest for

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<sup>59</sup> Wright, *Plains of Promise*, 143–144. Further page references are in the main text.

identity and foregrounding the notion of Indigeneity as lived experience: "there had been more talk about discovering her identity than action. 'Go on, admit it. You were just hooked on the romance of it. You're not connected with reality'" (227). Even when Mary manages to establish the necessary connections to her homeland, the disturbing truth is ultimately withheld truth:

she simply did not understand the dynamics of relationships which appeared to have finished up bitterly decades ago. In one hard lesson in local history, she learned that you needed to have been through it all in order to understand. You were never going to be told. (297)

Mary's unproductive search for Indigeneity is embedded in her relationship with the manipulative, opaque Buddy Doolan, the Coalition of Aboriginal Governments' Indigenous leader. This affair is symptomatic of Mary's deep sense of unbelonging and underscores gendered disempowerment in the urban setting of contemporary Indigenous politics. Buddy is elusive and noncommittal in their relationship and places "his ego, his people and land [...] before anything, or anyone else" (228), and is an example of the masculinist attitude in Indigenous politics that Marcia Langton denounces. Despite their permanent non-encounter, indicative of the problems riddling Indigenous recovery, Mary and Buddy's hapless coupling bears potentially-dangerous fruit. Jessie, their "very special child [...] will be a powerful woman one day" (214–215) but is also connected to death. She causes Grandfather Frank Doolan, a traditional healer, to have a premonitory nightmare in which his country, house, and family perish in spinifex flames, which harks back to Ivy's mother's suicide: "Frank was pretty shaken by his dream and the crow [in Mary's flat] [...] Buddy talked about changing the world. Frank talked about *death* and *powerlessness*" (220–221, emphases added). Mary is advised to return Jessie to her homeland, although, typically, the text leaves the reader wondering why "people like Jessie had to forfeit next-of-kin while passing through this world" (270).

Time and again, the novel insists on the inaccessibility of the Indigenous universe. Mary's attempts to trace her origins are

constantly thwarted by the vicious circle of her own uprootedness and others' silence,<sup>60</sup> so she never manages to establish lasting connections with Aborigines. She lacks kinship connections and displays westernized attitudes and convictions. Educated in urban middle-class fashion,

she had no family strength to back her in the life she had chosen for herself. She perceived a denial by Aboriginal people wherever she worked to accept her Aboriginality [...] And this, she was certain, depended on finding her mother so that she could claim family and land affiliations. (237–240)

The text leaves in the air whether this distance can be rationalized or is the product of her 'evil powers': why is she perceived as a "bloody scary woman [...] a bogeywoman of the Gulf roads" (249)? Disturbingly, the novel describes Mary's hesitant journey back to the site of rupture, St Dominic's, as inexorable and inevitable. She is drawn there against her will, unaware she is being reconnected to country, by some kind of ontological connection. Moreover, local resistance to her return is almost magically broken; Old Dorrie's son Jimbo "Delainy couldn't believe it when he heard himself inviting them to stay up North" (243). Yet, while "she did need to [...] connect the threads and overcome her intuitive fear of the unknown" (254), she cannot overcome the barriers of her cultural conditioning into whiteness, but Dreaming forces seem to be at work as well:

The memories were too sad, too bad. Records were incomplete [...] And no one had ever returned looking as successful as Mary. She was like a white woman, and everyone came straight out and said so ... *She felt that most people treated her as though she might be carrying some deadly infectious disease* [...] Mary was unable to create within herself a sense of belonging, or to feel that she was related to any of the families. (282–283)

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<sup>60</sup> Buddy is aware of Mary's origins at St. Dominic's but, for reasons the novel does not clear up, never reveals this sensitive information to her (227).



The final, brief Gothic encounter with her mother on the former mission grounds, which also involves Jessie, is orchestrated by Elliot. Ivy, maddened and taken for a "*ghost*" with "white skin, like she got no blood" (200–201), has been returned to the mission after a long absence in an asylum, and is looked after by Elliot in his "outstation, a lonely place with a look of abandonment," safely hidden from the main old mission compound. The threesome's fruitless reunion in this eerie, rather Gothic location conjures up the magic of Frank's nightmare of death, destruction, and loss, and while fireballs of dry spinifex grass surround them and the stormy weather becomes a pathetic fallacy, Ivy reveals herself as a monstrous growling "wild animal cowering in one corner" (293). Elliot does not reveal the true nature of their family connection, and "Mary felt a sudden surge of disappointment and depression which she could not explain to herself" (294), as she and Jessie are not acknowledged by Ivy. This sense of disconnection and failure is underscored by Mary's forced departure from the reserve, which can be signified within the parameters of Western reality as well as the Dreaming.

Buddy's inadequate second-in-command has misused information gathered at St Dominic's Mission in his need for voter support for the pan-Indigenous movement. To convince city-based Aborigines of a treaty with the federal government, he has publicly denounced places like St Dominic's, which are "so conditioned to the white man's mentality that it would be light years away before they were ready to join the rest of the country in reclaiming their rights" (299). The council of elders takes offense but also accuses Elliot of causing havoc by uniting the three women. In an uncanny merger of Dreaming and biblical knowledge, they constitute Mary, Jessie, and Ivy as an evil female foil of the Holy Trinity—the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost:

He had made a promise to them to not reunite Ivy and her mother. Now the promise was broken. They had told him *only one*, now the power would be too strong. They had told him to quickly choose which one he wanted to stay if he had wanted redemption from God. *Not three. Just one.* (299)

It is typical for the troubling character of the novel that the weakening and corruption of the coalition's politics could be precisely the disruptive consequence of Mary's 'malignant'

presence—just as Ivy’s presence destroyed the mental institution, the religious authority at St Dominic’s<sup>61</sup> and a camp of Indigenous fringe dwellers. Either way, the council rejects Mary on grounds of self-determination: “We don’t want anyone’s conscience by prescription, Mary. We will do it ourselves” (301).

The reader is left with a pressing sense of incompleteness at this stage, further enhanced by the puzzling finale provided by Dreamtime narrative. Elliot’s “story, which he swore was true” (302), defies Western conceptions of fiction inasmuch as “Aboriginal societies [...] do not recognise a category ‘fiction’.”<sup>62</sup> Indeed, as Stephen Muecke holds, its “stories are all true to the extent that the discourse is correctly produced within the cultural apparatuses which make it possible.”<sup>63</sup> The overpowering complexity of the novel, which confronts mainstream and Indigenous reality in fiction, comes fully to the fore in this Dreamtime narrative, which harks back to Elliot’s journey to Ivy’s homeland. Through the cyclical absence and presence of water, the story of the great lake is inscribed in the tension between life and death, and thus in the realm of the ghostly. From this perspective, Ivy—whom the text scripts as a white ghost—may represent destruction, regeneration, and identitarian experimentation in Elliot’s story.

Elliot’s tale yields no clear-cut interpretation. It refers to the geographical location called the ‘Disappearing Lake’ on Ivy’s homeland, where Elliot nearly died in his efforts to retrace Ivy’s steps. One powerful interpretation is that the crows, a recurrent obscure symbol of evil in the novel, stand for white civilization, and that the solitary water-bird represents Ivy’s mother (and one should note the link with Scott’s curlew here). The latter is endowed with the gift of life by its secret ability to keep the water flowing in the

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<sup>61</sup> The text ironically writes Ivy up for this feat: “The great belly-dancing fiasco initiated the finish of those powerful arms of exclusive religious sects (as well as others not so exclusive) which kept themselves financially afloat by imposing missionary zeal on voiceless minorities. Ivy Koopundi never knew she had caused the toppling of mission control over so many Aboriginal lives. In future years, if the lives of Aboriginal women such as Ivy are unravelled, their names may be remembered like latter-day Joans of Arc or Florence Nightingales” (180).

<sup>62</sup> Muecke, *Textual Spaces*, 65.

<sup>63</sup> *Textual Spaces*, 89.

lake. The crows' efforts to control this bird and her children—all possessors of the life-giving secret—and to trick them away from their native territory, would stand for white civilization. They represent white disruption of the Indigenous tribal fabric, removal of the Indigenous from their lands, and destruction of the local habitat at large. Thus, Ivy's return to her homeland, where the great lake has actually vanished, would be the key to a regeneration of Indigenous culture. It is noteworthy that throughout the novel the special powers of Ivy's ancestors is hinted at as well as perceived in Mary and Jessie.

However, events take a different turn in the story when the notion of madness enters. Despite the crows' disruptive efforts, the successive generations of water-birds manage to send the life-giving secret back to the lake through their children, until one loses her child in "a terrible place," presumably the event of Ivy's removal from her mother at St Dominic's. The madness this event generates in the water-bird, which the "evil" crows are unable to check, is said to cause the loss of the secret of regeneration and the drying-up of the lake.<sup>64</sup> As a result, the massive disruption of tribal links provokes the deathblow to local Indigenous country and culture, epitomized in the disappearance of the lake on Ivy's homeland, and places the blame on white society.

So, if one regards matters in the context of Elliott's Dreaming, what does the elders' unwillingness to reunite mother, child, and grandchild signify? Why can't these three women be of "one heartbeat"?<sup>65</sup> Could one not claim that reestablishing these links would restore the life-giving secret? And is this not Elliot's aim? Is he a misunderstood prophet, the possessor of Secret-Sacred knowledge, due to his extensive traveling, that surpasses the powers of interpretation of the fragmented group of Elders? Is he attempting, in veiled words, to convince Mary to stay and recover her roots? Why is the lake filling up again after the thirty years of drought which have coincided with the women's exile from their homeland but comes to an end with Mary and Jessie's presence in the area? And why do these women only find out when they are forced to leave? Is this a

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<sup>64</sup> Wright, *Plains of Promise*, 304.

<sup>65</sup> O'Brien, "Alexis Wright Interview," 218.

confirmation of the correctness of the elders' policy of separation? Is the key to tribal regeneration now in keeping all of Ivy's line forever away from the lake, because the damage or 'madness' inflicted on them has been too great? Are the Stolen Generations irrecoverable for Indigeneity? Or is this sudden resurgence of the lake the result of Elliot's initiative, and confirmed in Mary's determination to return there some day with Jessie? Is the council of elders indeed too affected by assimilation to white civilization to find the right course of action?

There is yet another possible explanation for the elders' decisions. One might argue that Mary's realization of who her mother is would be a devastating emotional experience. The impact of white society has left Ivy in a pitiful state, mad and utterly lost. Preventing such an 'evil' encounter would therefore be a measure of sensible protection, a question of keeping disruptive knowledge hidden and harmless, on a par with the secrecy maintained in *My Place*. However, if the reestablishment of the family links is not allowed, this is also a death warrant for Indigenous culture. If the secret of regeneration is forever lost, if Indigenous culture has no future, if too much damage has been inflicted by the irruption of white civilization into Indigenous society, how does this accord with Mary's last vision of the reappearing lake, and her determination to visit it with Jessie? Does the text bargain here for time, time for Indigenous culture to come to terms with itself? Does it offer an opportunity to the Stolen Generations to recover their Indigenous roots?

Mainstream readers will perceive an acute sense of female-Gothic open-endedness in this novel. No clear answers are given to repair the Indigenous plight, and, to a greater or lesser degree, blame is assigned to all sides involved. Here, the uncanny obviously operates through unfamiliarity with the Indigenous universe, which, while actively engaging with the events depicted, reaches beyond mainstream understanding. However, it also operates through secret knowledge that is unsettling when it comes to the fore. As to the former, the fact that Elliot attempts to reunite the three women may impair the elders' plans and raise doubts about who is pursuing the right course of action. And as to the latter, one may wonder about the true significance of the story that Elliot has revealed. For one thing, it complicates possible interpretations of the novel. Elliot's account defies a simple Western distinction between metaphor and the

literal, fantasy and reality; it undermines a black-and-white vision of the problems at the reservation; and it shakes mainstream bases of interpretation.

If solutions are neither black nor white within the metaphorical, nor are they so within the literal: they leave us with the issue of hybridity. What is to be done with Ivy, Mary, and Jessie, who are neither Indigenous nor Western women? Is their existence productive in terms of Indigeneity? What kind of identity may they constitute, and what sense of place may they obtain? In what ways do these solitary, misguided, but life-giving misfits connect to destruction and regeneration, to the disappearance or reappearance of the lake, to the Gulf of Carpentaria as Plains of Papery Grass or as Plains of Promise?

### **The Stolen Generations: Lost or Found?**

A serious problem in coming to terms with and understanding *Plains of Promise* for non-Indigenous readers is their probable lack of familiarity with the Dreaming or Dreamtime, while they *will* recognize the injustices inflicted upon the Indigenous community by the process of white colonization. The latter is emblematically represented in the blind imposition of Christian mission values and regulations on a haphazardly thrown-together group of dispossessed Indigenes from different affiliations at St Dominic's. It is also evident in the profiteering of the white health industry that flourishes from the presence of Ivy's Indigenous test case in Sycamore Heights Mental Health and Research Institution. Finally, it may be discerned in the pernicious effects of victim discourse:

*No wonder we can't get it together and get anywhere when all we do is argue about how much more oppressed we are than each other. [Mary] smiled at herself at the cynicism of the whole thing. It was rather amusing for a race of people to have stooped so low on the oppressors' terms and money and to have created their own secular power bases, cheap and nasty, based on a competition about who was the most*

oppressed and most severely disposed. Reduced to grovelling after government like a bunch of beggars.<sup>66</sup>

On its publication in 1997, *Plains of Promise* generated a critical discussion that centered on the accessibility of the text to (white) readership, which generally felt excluded from the text and therefore did not appreciate its literary qualities. Unable to relate fully to its alienating content, critics did not know how to place the novel generically, which in turn led to its partial rejection.

Carolyn Bliss, a US-based critic, appears to apply a Gothic take when she describes the colonizing process in Wright's novel in vampiric terms through the "*desiccation* of a vast reservoir of indigenous strength, beauty, and power, emptied by the *depredations* of the invader." She also deems "[b]oth the suffering and the history in Wright's novel [... to be] all too real"<sup>67</sup> for the mainstream reader. Yet, she observes that this realism is not the case in the perception of the Indigenous characters:

[Their] strangeness and inaccessibility [...] in some ways is deeply satisfying in its refusal to naturalize their motives for a white Western readership. But in other ways, our failure to understand the central characters [...] keeps us out of the novel's territory [...] It is as if our colonizing gaze had been blocked or at least profoundly blurred. (682)

While she understands this lack of accessibility as problematic, she argues that the novel's "honesty" works precisely because of its "insistent unapologetic otherness" (682). Bliss's account of Wright's "impressive debut" draws attention to the uncanny qualities of this "disturbing story" (681) as it confronts non-Indigenous readers with what should be conceived of as a parallel, incommensurable Indigenous universe that operates within, through, against, and independent of mainstream reality. It is as if one can scratch the

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<sup>66</sup> Wright, *Plains of Promise*, 265–266 (italics in original).

<sup>67</sup> Carolyn Bliss, "Review of *Plains of Promise*," *World Literature Today* 72.3 (Summer 1998): 682 (emphasis added). Further page references are in the main text.

surface of this tale of colonization and reveal the pulse of an entirely different, defamiliarized world beyond Western understanding, which alienates the mainstream reader and makes the fictional space unhomely. To account for this defamiliarizing palimpsest, this incommensurable encounter of the mainstream and Indigenous universes, Bliss highlights the novel's similarities with South American Magical Realism and North American nature writing by indigenous writers. This notwithstanding, she points out that Wright's first novel "does not mimic magic realism,"

but it does draw from and reproduce for the reader a similar sense of the interpenetration of the miraculous and the mundane [...] it acknowledges and celebrates the claims that land and landscape make upon the human imagination and the spiritual dimensions of these claims. (682)

Other critics, such as Jenny Pausacker, have also pointed the latter way. In the national newspaper *The Age* she considers the novel to be an exponent of "an authentically Australian magical realism that puts imported versions into new perspective."<sup>68</sup>

As I argued in chapter 2, contemporary Indigenous Australian writing deserves its own own generic denomination, and *Plains of Promise* is an emblematic example. The novel's agenda of Indigenous self-definition and self-determination refuses the colonizing gaze and mainstream assimilation to a Western epistemological paradigm, bending Western genre to Indigenous form and content to achieve the author's objectives. Wright lines out her target audience from a protected inner circle of 'initiated' readers to wider, outer ones of the 'uninitiated' to be addressed with issues relevant to the Indigenous community, since they result in great part from the intrusion of mainstream society:

When I write fictional books I am only dealing with myself as the sole reader of my work. I do not think of other people as readers of my book outside my community. As I already said, it is very important to me that my community accepts my

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<sup>68</sup> Quoted on the back cover of *Plains of Promise* (UQP edition, 1997).

work. Even so [...] there are other main goals of being a writer, particularly as an Indigenous writer, such as the goal of publication, and as many people as possible, reading your work. The ambition I have for my work is to be published, to be read in Australia, to be read overseas. For the whole world to read it.<sup>69</sup>

It is in the tense interface of Indigenous and non-Indigenous epistemologies as a postcolonizing, performative site of emancipation and identity formation that the literary genre of Aboriginal Reality obtains and adapts Western form to Indigenous oral narrative.

Thus, *Plains of Promise* is a novel in which two parallel universes engage with one and the same story from entirely different points of view; its plot and characterization can be explained neither in the exclusive terms of a Western epistemology of rationality, nor as an Indigenous ontology of Dreaming beliefs. The novel's uncanny effect on the reader is precisely based on the promiscuous ability of these two epistemologies to interrogate and "solicit"<sup>70</sup> each other without either of them taking the upper hand. Attempts to explain one universe in terms of the other is ultimately to no avail. This failure to come to agreement is paradigmatic for the political deadlock in which Australian Indigenous/non-Indigenous relationships found themselves in terms of Native Title, Reconciliation, and Apology at the time of the novel's conception and publication. In this deadlock, neither group felt fully at home in Australian territory. Logically, it is in the last decade of the twentieth century that the storyline comes to its puzzling open end, in which the hybrid female trinity of Ivy, Mary, and Jessie plays such a disturbing role.

The effect of defamiliarization for non-Indigenous readers caused by the use of Aboriginal Reality in *Plains of Promise* troubles critical interpretations of the novel: the Indigenous universe manifests itself,

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<sup>69</sup> Wright, "Politics of Writing," 19.

<sup>70</sup> This Derridean term is quoted in Gelder & Jacobs, *Uncanny Australia*, 21–22. It connotes an uncanny process of mutual incitation, attraction, concern and disturbance. The source text is Jacques Derrida, "Différance" (1970), in *Margins of Philosophy*, tr. Alan Bass (*Marges de la philosophie*, 1972; Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982): 1–27.



yet consistently refuses access and a clear understanding of the mechanisms behind Indigenous destruction. Mainstream readers are alienated from traditional frames of interpretation in terms of Western science, progress, linearity, rationality, finality, and truth; the behavior and actions of most Indigenous characters remain obscure. They are thrown back on themselves, as no solution to the female protagonists' plight is offered in this "tragedy without redemption."<sup>71</sup> They are thus left to contemplate and assume the havoc wrought by white colonization to which Indigenous society is so unsuccessfully (un)assimilated.<sup>72</sup> Discovering the seed of hope in *Plains of Promise* is therefore an arduous task for the many readers uninitiated in the realm of the Dreaming. However, avoiding easy solutions to the Indigenous plight by offering a non-accommodating narrative may be precisely the author's point. Thus, she writes: "*Plains of Promise* was a call for mercy, a call for some understanding of what has been happening to people, what our condition is [...] to give us a chance to change."<sup>73</sup>

By tracing the dramatic history of genocide through the vicissitudes of the half-caste female family line, *Plains of Promise* becomes a desperate chronicle of the ways in which mainstream intervention has both caused the current Indigenous plight and failed to provide viable solutions for it. Thus, the novel interrogates how a space for Indigenous survival may be shaped in contemporary Australia. At the same time, Wright is critical of the ways in which Indigenous society itself manages the issues of blame, responsibility, and disempowerment across the axes of race, gender, and class. The novel displays this in the violence perpetrated among the mission dwellers and the troubling sides of Indigenous political action in the rural and urban setting, exemplified by the disturbing male characters Elliot Pugnose and Buddy Doolan. Susan Barrett sees Wright's non-committal narrative as educative:

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<sup>71</sup> Finnane, "Promises kept, promises broken."

<sup>72</sup> See Cornelis Martin Renes, "Discomforting Readings: Uncanny Perceptions of Self in Alexis Wright's *Plains of Promise* and David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon*," *Eucalypt* 2 (2002): 76–102.

<sup>73</sup> Ravenscroft, "Politics of Exposure," 79–80.

shifts in point of view remove the dangers of unconditional empathy and identification with one single character and force the reader to reflect on the question of responsibility and where the blame really lies.<sup>74</sup>

And, in a more inclusive summation, Michèle Grossman writes:

*Plains of Promise* [...] does not shy from exploring the ways in which the sources of women's marginalisation, abuse and rejection have stemmed not only from the incursive exploitation of white men [...] but also from the distortions and dissatisfactions of gendered identities and power relations within Aboriginal communities and communities.<sup>75</sup>

Thus, Ivy, Mary, and Jessie's hybridity comments on how the problems of female empowerment in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous society have been played out through the plight of the Stolen Generations. The blame for the sexual abuse of Indigenous women has often been assigned to the resulting mixed progeny itself, and has cast those children in a destructive spiral of violence, ostracism, guilt, silence, and denial. As the embodiment of a cursed, 'impure' version of Indigeneity, they have often been considered detrimental to Indigenous survival. Yet another manifestation of Indigeneity, they also configure a key to Indigenous recovery, however illegitimate and promiscuous its constitution may be considered.

The ambiguous perception of their embodied difference as problem as well as solution ties in with the complex configuration of the Dreaming of the Great Lake. This location, as the home of the life-giving Serpent, scripts the realm of the Indigenous female as a powerful site of life and death in which the chances of survival may be both lost and found. Like so many other Indigenous women

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<sup>74</sup> Susan Barrett, "Reconstructing Australia's Shameful Past: The Stolen Generations in Life writing, fiction and film," *Lignes 2* (2005): 10 of 13, [www.lignes.org](http://www.lignes.org) (accessed 11 May 2006).

<sup>75</sup> Grossman, "Reach On Out to the Other Side," 85-87.

writers, in *Plains of Promise* Wright has to struggle with the historical situatedness of female Indigeneity. As Carole Ferrier argues,

Indigenous women encounter powerful pressures to adopt a stance of 'respectability', especially in relation to sexuality and to the family, because of the hegemonic, sexualised racist stereotyping of black women: they may even have tried to adopt this stance in an often vain attempt to combat the systematic removal of their children and the destruction of their family life [...] [Therefore] Australian Indigenous women's earlier autobiographical writing has been dominated by self-constructions as moral and respectable.<sup>76</sup>

Wright therefore chooses a more dialogic, productive approach: while aiming to write up female Indigeneity, *Plains of Promise* consistently refuses to accommodate both Indigenous and non-Indigenous readers in her fiction. By activating the uncanny in the description of the vicissitudes of the novel's central hybrid female trinity, the novel's "honesty"—as Carolyn Bliss has it—avoids Manichean views of Australia's complex postcolonizing condition. Rather than reverting to static notions of authenticity, it defines racial and gendered conflict as an active, promiscuous negotiation of identity.

As mentioned, many a reviewer had mixed feelings on first reading *Plains of Promise*. Paul Sharrad notes that "most of the initial response to this work was negative, largely because of the depressingly naturalistic picture of Indigenous life in both outback and urban contexts." He cites Tegan Bennett, who finds fault with its use of syntax and dialogue, and Liam Davison, who is critical of its multitude of "competing" characters and storylines. Sharrad acknowledges some of the formal criticism: "On the first reading, there seems to be little promise at all in the plains of this book." However, he observes that in-depth analysis of the text's polyphony

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<sup>76</sup> Carole Ferrier, "'Disappearing Memory' and the Colonial Present in Recent Indigenous Women's Writing," *JASAL* (Special Issue, 2008): 37–55, <http://www.nla.gov.au/openpublish/index.php/jasal/article/view/721> (accessed 10 September 2008): 41.

reveals an irony which addresses multiple points of view and expresses an ambiguous promise of Indigenous survival:

The positive features of the writing are the ability to orchestrate different voices to give a sense of the complexities and subtleties of cross-cultural negotiation in minority groups. Silences, indirection, invisible agendas permeate the story. They can generate conflict and express fear, but they also contain the seeds of resistance.<sup>77</sup>

In hindsight, Sharrad finds that the “destitution” of the novel’s characters factually offers some kind of freedom that allows them to grow. He therefore equally concludes that the parameters of racial and gendered conflict in Australian society are productively challenged in *Plains of Promise*:

Wright employs her own mode of ‘magic realism’ not as an escapist entertainment, nor as an indigenist essentialist romanticism, but ‘to create a truer replica of reality’ that holds out some promise for freedom.<sup>78</sup>

I concur with Sharrad’s analysis, but if Wright’s fiction is an emancipatory attempt at a greater truth than conventional Western reality itself, how is this agenda continued, adapted, and (re)shaped in *Carpentaria*, Alexis Wright’s second novel?

### **Uncanny Configurations of Truth in *Carpentaria***

A considerable amount of time elapsed between the publication of *Plains of Promise* and *Carpentaria*. The latter met with general critical acclaim and landed the 2007 Miles Franklin Award, which seems to

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<sup>77</sup> Paul Sharrad, “Beyond Capricornia: Alexis Wright’s ambiguous promise,” conference paper for EAALALS, Ca’ Foscari, Venice, 25–29 March 2008): 4–5 of 16. Sharrad comments on Tegan Bennett, in “Abused and Beaten,” *Weekend Australian* 10–11 (May 1997), Review: 9, and on Liam Davison in “A Powerful New Black Voice,” *Australian Book Review* 191 (June 1997): 42.

<sup>78</sup> Sharrad, “Beyond Capricornia,” 6–7 of 16.

point to greater maturity in Wright's writing and broader mainstream sensitivity to the issues addressed in her fiction. This notwithstanding, Sharrad highlights the thematic and structural continuity between both novels, and deems Nicholas José's 1997 review of *Plains of Promise* equally applicable to *Carpentaria*, which focusses on the coexistence of two incommensurable universes in the text:

What Wright so ambitiously undertakes in the first two-thirds of the book is to give a solid social texture to the narrative, yet at the same time to look beyond to an entirely different, spiritualised understanding of character, motive and event. I use the word 'fantastic' for this story because of the way history becomes a dimension of symbol, imaginary presences and magic.

Kate McFadyen echoes Carolyn Bliss's analysis of *Plains of Promise* when she describes the tension between the real and the surreal in *Carpentaria* as the uncanny "feeling that you are an outsider, an interloper [...] one minute you're being confided in [...] the next you are left stranded and completely lost." Like Bliss, she calls this sense of defamiliarization productive, since *Carpentaria* is that unique specimen of a novel that introduces the reader to a new world which is "both familiar and strange":

Wright expects her readers to work, to keep up. If you stumble and lose your bearings, you just have to trust the narrator and let the eddies of digression flow around you until you can regain your toehold. The rewards are plenty. It is the most exhilarating book I have read in a long time.<sup>79</sup>

The puzzling lack of transparency experienced by readers of her fiction, which led precisely to *Plains of Promises's* mixed reception,<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Kate McFadyen, "Makes lightning look dull (Alexis Wright *Carpentaria*)," *Australian Book Review* (October 2006): 43.

<sup>80</sup> Sharrad comments quite off-handedly that "with the greater general awareness in the last decade of the politics of Redfern, ATSIC, the homelands movement, the Stolen Generation, etc., it is a lot easier for readers now to make sense of what

represents no problem for Sharrad, who locates the great merit of Wright's writing precisely in her ability to fuse everyday reality and the mythic. Indeed, he celebrates her capacity to "mak[e] the real incredible and the fabulous uncomfortably tied to the harsher aspects of rural Australian and Aboriginal life" as a liberating impulse.<sup>81</sup> Similarly, Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass, and McCredden highlight the Indigenous agenda behind the novel and foreground its environmentalist inscription:

Wright's [...] narrative draws on traditional storying in order to prosecute a politics of the sacred which cannot be dissociated from a politics of the environment [...] Wright mobilises the tropes of politicised magic realism and those of traditional narratives in order to create a powerful new narrative for our times, one that expresses the sense of power of environmental forces beyond the control of man, and of the emotional affect that inheres in her Waanyi characters' uncompromising commitment to their homeland.<sup>82</sup>

One should in this way read Wright's claim that Indigenous literature is a "time bomb [...] breaking down many barriers" by "believing the unbelievable."<sup>83</sup> The perception that *Carpentaria* is arguably "the best Australian novel for years,"<sup>84</sup> underpins Alison Ravenscroft's positive review: "this is the kind of writing in which a reader can put their entire trust in the narrator, put the weight of their doubt in the narrator's hands."<sup>85</sup>

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goes on in the urban 'Victory Lane' section and its aftermath 'Plains of Papery Grass'" (Sharrad, "Beyond Capricornia," 4). This could point towards a re-appraisal of Wright's first novel.

<sup>81</sup> Sharrad, "Beyond Capricornia," 6 of 13. For Nicholas José's review, see Works Cited.

<sup>82</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Frances Devlin-Glass & Lyn McCredden, *Intimate Horizons* (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2009): 240–241.

<sup>83</sup> Wright, "Politics of Writing," 19–20.

<sup>84</sup> Ferrier, "The Best Australian Novel for Years."

<sup>85</sup> Alison Ravenscroft, "When the Narrator's Art Matches the Magical Storytelling," *The Age* (19 August 2006): A2, A22.

The writing of this complex, award-winning novel occupied a full decade, and grants us another instance of Aboriginal Reality. Wright generates an epic tale as large and "sprawling"<sup>86</sup> as the area of the Gulf of Carpentaria itself, its storyline meandering like its Serpent river and expanding and contracting on the perpetual movement of the Gulf's tides. While its length has been critiqued as excessive, Craig San Roque, an Australian psychotherapist who has worked closely with the author, observes that Wright excels at the complex task of transposing her own culture, her "known and familiar," into a shape, content, and structure that is intelligible, sensible, and aesthetic to the dominant culture, "whose conceptions of love, death, hate, knowledge, truth and continuity are enfolded into a European grid system." San Roque therefore concludes that *Carpentaria* needs its length in order to bridge "contemporary insight and ancestral integrity."<sup>87</sup> The author's inspiration for her contemporary origin story of biblical length and mythical impact is drawn from a commanding vision of the Gulf's "ancestral" Gregory River, which reminded her of the Rainbow Serpent and inspired "*Carpentaria* [as] a narration of the kind of stories we can tell to our ancestral land."<sup>88</sup> Indeed, it is the author's traditional homeland that is the novel's setting as well as its main protagonist:

I develop my novels on ideas of seeing how the land might respond to different stories. The land is [...] one of or even the central character. Most of the images and ideas relate to the land being alive and having important meaning, which is tied to the ancient roots of our continent. The people who

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<sup>86</sup> See Davison, "A Powerful New Black Voice," 42; Frances Devlin-Glass, "Review Essay: Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*," *Antipodes* (June 2007): 82–84; Peter Pierce, "Calming influence in balance fraught with pain (Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*)," *Canberra Times* (2 September 2006): newspaper section: Panorama 13; Sharrad, "Beyond Capricornia"; and Craig San Roque, "On Reading *Carpentaria*: A review of Alexis Wright's Miles Franklin Award-winning novel," in *The Uses of Subjective Experience: A Weekend of Conversations between ANZSJA Analysts and Academics who work with Jung's Ideas* (ANZSJA, Melbourne, 20–21 October 2007).

<sup>87</sup> San Roque, "On Reading *Carpentaria*," 4, 19 of 20. Likewise, Carole Ferrier concludes that it is "a very big novel both in its size and in its qualities" (Ferrier, "The Best Australian Novel for Years").

<sup>88</sup> Alexis Wright, "On Writing *Carpentaria*," *Heat*, NS 13 (2007): 79–80.

populate the landscape of my writing usually come afterwards—after I have built a place for them.<sup>89</sup>

*Carpentaria* could be considered an attempt at mental Native Title through an imagined recovery of the author's traditional country, "an Indigenous sovereignty of the imagination."<sup>90</sup> Wright's celebration of the Indigenous habitat of her homeland is peopled with an outstanding cast of Indigenous characters fighting the despairing odds imposed by mainstream society.

### Voices of 'Desperance' or 'Esperance'?

The very beginning of the novel echoes the distressing start of *Plains of Promise* by addressing the uneasy, oppressive overlap of race, gender, and class issues in an Indigenous society beset by destructive forces. The first chapter's title, "From time immemorial," draws the reader into the endless timespace of the Dreaming, while its capitalized epigraph denounces the impact of white society on Indigenous girls in remote communities:

A NATION CHANTS, *BUT WE KNOW YOUR STORY ALREADY*.  
THE BELLS PEAL EVERYWHERE. CHURCHBELLS CALLING  
THE FAITHFUL TO THE TABERNACLE WHERE THE GATES OF  
HEAVEN WILL OPEN, BUT NOT FOR THE WICKED CALLING  
INNOCENT LITTLE BLACK GIRLS FROM A DISTANT  
COMMUNITY WHERE THE WHITE DOVE BEARING AN OLIVE  
BRANCH NEVER LANDS. LITTLE GIRLS WHO COME BACK  
AFTER CHURCH ON SUNDAY, WHO LOOK AROUND  
THEMSELVES AT THE HUMAN FALLOUT AND ANNOUNCE  
MATTER-OF-FACTLY, *ARMAGEDDON BEGINS HERE*.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Vernay, "An Interview with Alexis Wright," 121.

<sup>90</sup> Wright, "On Writing *Carpentaria*," 94.

<sup>91</sup> Alexis Wright, *Carpentaria* (Artarmon, NSW: Giramondo, 2006): 1. Further page references are in the main text.



The epigraph leads into the Rainbow Serpent Dreaming, which tells of the perpetual making and remaking of the river country that nowadays boasts Desperance, an outpost of Western civilization hosting the divided society of the Indigenous Westside and Eastside mobs and white Uptown. The destruction sung to Indigenous culture and land by the suspect imposition of white civilization and religion ("We know your story already") is questioned and unsettled by an Indigenous counternarrative of mythic proportions. This countertext is molded by the meandering tracks of the slow, sinuous, and powerful Rainbow Serpent's movements through Waanyi country which determine the structure of the ensuing narrative (1-3).

The uncanny interface of Indigenous and non-Indigenous culture is structured as "an epic on several planes that knits together meanings underlying the lives of the Waanyi people of the Gulf country of far north Queensland with local stories of responses to new invasions," according to Nonie Sharp. The novel goes far beyond the Western containment the first chapter's epigraph suggests and undoes its capitalized weight by the bulky impact of its interwoven, heteroglossic stories in double-spaced small print. The large print of the second-chapter's epigraph fixes the novel's Indigenous inscription and sprawling structure as the remedy for present-day despair: "THE GHOSTS IN THE MEMORIES OF THE OLD FOLK [...] SAID ANYONE CAN FIND HOPE IN THE STORIES: THE BIG STORIES AND THE LITTLE ONES IN BETWEEN" (12). Thus, the powerful Rainbow Snake's stirrings of literary creation do eventually not suggest Armageddon for the Indigenous mob, but honor the town of Desperance's name in wiping it from the face of the earth with a devastating cyclone. This tropical storm slowly builds up throughout the text in magical-mythic interplay between the sea, sky, land, and their human mediator, the Indigenous leader Normal Phantom, and clears the land for a new and fresh Indigenous beginning:

All dreams come true somehow, Norm murmured, sizing up the flattened landscape, already planning the home he would rebuild on the same piece of land where his old house had been, among the spirits in the remains of the ghost town, where the snake slept underneath [...] It was a mystery, but there was so much song wafting off the watery land, singing the country afresh as [Norm and his grandson Bala] walked

hand in hand out of town, down the road, Westside, to home.  
(519)

Aboriginal Reality in *Carpentaria* spins “a powerful allegory for our times: the Earth’s retaliation in Gaia-like fashion, responding to the deep tramping marks of our footprints on the climate, on the places of both land and water,”<sup>92</sup> as Nonie Sharp has it.

Several critics have drawn attention to *Carpentaria*’s political agenda as ecologically inscribed, promoting awareness of the interconnectivity and interdependency of all life forms in their local habitats. In *Nourishing Terrains*, Deborah Rose addresses Australian Indigenous epistemologies from an eco-scientific perspective, closely linking respect and care for the local natural environment to the observance of Indigenous belief systems known as the Dreaming or Dreamtime. Thus, the dreaming is at once timeless and local by dictating the Law of the land. She calls attention to how these belief systems foster non-hierarchical economies of mutual benefit between the different constituents of a local habitat, connecting all that constitutes country horizontally rather than vertically:

The totemic metaphysics of mutual life-giving draws different species into overlapping and ramifying patterns of connection through benefit. Many of these benefits are not immediately reciprocated. Rather, they keep moving through other living things, sustaining life through the twin processes of life for itself and life for others.<sup>93</sup>

This analysis is useful for an understanding of the leveling effects of Aboriginal Reality as employed in *Carpentaria* on the racial, gendered, and classist hierarchies and economies generated by capitalist exploitation of the land. Thus, Rose specifies that Indigenous epistemologies “resituate the human” by conferring subjectivity as sentience and agency on country; by the reciprocity of all life processes; by kinship with nature through human and non-human totems; and by calling humans into action rather than having

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<sup>92</sup> Nonie Sharp, “Fiction (review of *Carpentaria*),” *Island* 111 (Summer 2007): 62.

<sup>93</sup> Rose, “An Indigenous Philosophical Ecology,” 295–297.

them act autonomously, so that "country, or nature, far from being an object to be acted upon, is a self-organising system that brings people and other living things into being, into action, into sentience itself."<sup>94</sup>

Frances Devlin-Glass holds that Wright addresses a readership that is able to discern the importance of environmental issues from its appreciation of artistic skill and authority.<sup>95</sup> She also highlights how the novel, through the use of the central trope of the Rainbow Serpent, activates "Indigenous knowledge systems." What these contain in terms of "ecological depth," local situatedness, interrelatedness with all aspects of life, and "communal construction/negotiation of reality" is hard to translate into Western systems of knowledge. *Carpentaria* as an instance of Aboriginal Reality also provides room for the appearance of the uncanny in blurring the neat borders between knowledge systems and provoking lack of translatability. Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass, and McCredden speak of "dreaming narratives," which they elaborate following Deborah Rose's eco-analysis. Dreaming narratives

integrate fields that are separate discursive domains in western knowledge—philosophy, religion, economics, ecology, epistemology, kinship, gender behaviour, kinship systems, interpersonal relations, geography and mapping. To separate *storying* as a self-contained discursive field is therefore not possible, and that creates an epistemological impasse for westerners which poets and prose writers have sought to bridge.<sup>96</sup>

So, if we are to consider Aboriginal Reality as a contemporary Indigenous genre of writing, then it is clear that we cannot read it according to the constraints of Western academia and criticism but must accept how it spills over the discrete borders of Western genre. This we have already seen in the fiction of Sally Morgan, Kim Scott, and the first two volumes of Mudrooroo's Tasmanian quintet.

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<sup>94</sup> "An Indigenous Philosophical Ecology," 302–303.

<sup>95</sup> Devlin-Glass, "Review Essay," 83.

<sup>96</sup> Ashcroft et al., *Intimate Horizons*, 205–209.

The Jungian psychoanalyst Craig San Roque takes an eco-psychological tack which avoids subsuming Indigenous reality and myth under the hierarchical European framework of his discipline and takes that into literature. He laments the serious lack of Australian peers who are not open to “the indigenous faculty of imagination—that is to say, *imagination alive in the specific context of the local environment—in ‘country’*,” and flags Alexis Wright’s writing as a positive example for its productive/promiscuous interconnection of “ancestral themes, nature experienced, contemporary fact.”<sup>97</sup> Driving this eco-psychological argument further, Michèle Grossman sees *Carpentaria* as an antidote to Freud’s patriarchal–hierarchical account of Indigeneity by the way the novel configures an all-embracing awareness of identity rooted in the “oceanic” effacement of the distinction between the self and the surrounding world:

Sigmund Freud had his doubts about what Romain Rolland termed the “oceanic feeling” of seamless union between one’s self and the world at large. For Rolland, the oceanic signified a universal human impulse towards spiritual conviction. Freud disagreed, characterising the oceanic in his *Civilisation and its Discontents* as a remnant of infantile narcissism, in which the very young child fails (at its peril in later life) to distinguish between self and other. Freud’s insistence that to be truly civilised requires the abandonment of oceanic bliss in order to build an ego that can survive the traumas imposed by a capricious external reality is deeply ingrained in Western thinking about the self. *Alexis Wright’s Carpentaria makes one wonder afresh what it was that Freud so feared about a relationship between self and world conceived of ecologically, so to speak, rather than forever at war.*<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> San Roque, “On Reading *Carpentaria*,” 1–3 of 20 (emphasis added).

<sup>98</sup> Michèle Grossman, “Risk, Roguery and Revelation,” *The Australian Literary Review* 1.2 (October 2006): 10, emphasis added, [http://infoweb.newsbank.com/iw-search/we/InfoWeb?p\\_product=AWNB&p\\_theme=aggregated5&p\\_action=doc&p\\_docid=1148A0D9851BE068&p\\_docnum=1&p\\_queryname=16](http://infoweb.newsbank.com/iw-search/we/InfoWeb?p_product=AWNB&p_theme=aggregated5&p_action=doc&p_docid=1148A0D9851BE068&p_docnum=1&p_queryname=16) (accessed 9 September 2008).

The reference to the French Nobel-Prize-winning dramatist, essayist, art historian, mystic, and pacifist Romain Rolland (1866–1944) is not gratuitous, as he was a major influence on Freud’s work. His pacifist theory of ‘oceanic feeling’ was developed out of his studies of Eastern mysticism and claimed an indissoluble and limitless bond between the individual and the outer world which Freud rejected in his *Civilisation and Its Discontents*,<sup>99</sup> at odds with his proposal of civilization as a repressive means to curb individual desire and ensure social conformity. Grossman’s metaphor of “a world forever at war” is significant in the context of *Carpentaria*, in that, throughout most of the novel, the Indigenous mob is divided over traditional ownership. Joseph Midnight and Norm Phantom, the local Indigenous leaders, are “stubborn old mules who anchored their respective clans in the sordid history of who really owned different parcels of the local land [...] The *old war* went right up the coastline to Desperance and out to sea” and will not stop until their respective children, Will and Hope, manage to bridge the mob’s differences through their firm bond of love.

What Grossman calls *Carpentaria*’s oceanic ‘antidote’ can be understood to engage with the uncanny in inscribing the Indigenous and non-Indigenous world simultaneously in the text. Thus, it pits the modern, familiar world of Christian faith and civilizing zeal against the ancient Secret-Sacred Dreamtime belief and regenerative power of the Rainbow Serpent. As in *Plains of Promise*, it is these two incommensurable epistemologies that solicit each other throughout the text in unsettling ways:

This double-or-nothing proposition marks out the territory of *Carpentaria*. It’s a novel in which the doppelganger effect of indigenous and settler ways of being and knowing is fully, furiously, sustained as tandem stories and lives variously

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<sup>99</sup> Robert Roberts, “Emotions in the Christian Tradition,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Summer 2011), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2011/entries/emotion-Christian-tradition/> (accessed 31 May 2012).

intersect and diverge, yet remain haunted by the shadows of others' truths and lies.<sup>100</sup>

In Grossman's understanding, however, as a locally specific, non-hierarchical and non-exploitative form of knowledge it is the Indigenous approach that takes the upper hand in this tandem,

signal[ing] the parallel presence of different ways of understanding how country may be not protected but imperilled by those who claim authority over it without accepting responsibility for its care and management. (10).

Indeed, "*Carpentaria* is a swelling, heaving, tsunami of a novel" (10), whose oceanic rhythms of fictional imagination turn the biblical threat of a terminal Armageddon into a cleansing deluge for the Indigenous Australians by annihilating all vestiges of Western civilization on the local coast. This matches Craig San Roque's postcolonizing perspective that "the bruising truth is that Australasia and Oceania are locations of 'end times' for many, and 'new times' for others,"<sup>101</sup> ambiguously locating new life in the crucible of death. As I indicated earlier, the nucleus of destruction and renewal in the novel is a town called Desperance, whose culture is ominously forged by the exploitative, materialistic, and destructive economy of local mining.

Wright defies the arbitrariness of the Saussurean sign in naming locations, entities, and characters with an ironic self-serving touch. The town Desperance is both the Western outpost where exploitative capitalism can show its meanest face and the uncanny margin from which Indigenous culture can write back and postcolonize. Desperance is named after its founder, Captain Matthew Desperance Flinders. This toponym ambiguously shuttles between doom and hope by engaging different morphological possibilities across a variety of languages. Its connotations range from 'desperate',

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<sup>100</sup> Grossman, "Risk, Roguery and Revelation," 10. Further page references are in the main text. In Chapter 1 above, the issue of the haunting, defamiliarizing effect of the *doppelgänger* or double is addressed as a prime instance of the appearance of the uncanny.

<sup>101</sup> Roque, "On Reading *Carpentaria*," 4 of 20.

'despair' (English), 'désespoir' (French), 'desesperado' and 'desesperanza' (Spanish) to 'd'espoir' (French), 'de esperanza' (Spanish), and thus 'of hope' or 'hopeful'. Many names of white Uptown's population join form and content—'Mayor Bruiser', 'Constable Truthful E'Strange', 'Y. Pedigree', 'I. Damage', 'A. Clone', 'U. Torrent', 'B. Easy' reveal and mock their respective personalities, while a blurring lack of identity is suggested for a whole range of anonymous inhabitants taking their last name after the mysterious Elias Smith. Responsible for Indigenous dispossession and dislocation, the Gurfurrit Mining Corp is reminiscent of the powerful Century Zinc mining company's impact on Waanyi country,<sup>102</sup> its phonetic transcription of the expression 'go for it' blatantly referring to its unscrupulous land-grabbing policy.

These ironies mean to engage with the town's history from an Indigenous perspective. The seaboard town's natural marine economy is cut short by the changing tracks of a meandering "river that spurns human effort in one dramatic gesture."<sup>103</sup> It cuts its port off from the sea, and the economic activity shifts to the exploitative impact of mining. However, a mine explosion foreshadows the destructive tidal wave which turns Desperance onomatopoeically into a "boomtown" (98) and returns the area's life-sustaining link with the sea. Bala's perception of the location as a "big yellow snake" places the destruction wrought by the cyclone in the mythical realm of the Great Creation Being. And Norm's relief that "[t]hey were home" is based on the secure bearings provided by his Groper Dreaming, overruling the fact that "he could not discover one familiar feature of Desperance" at their arrival. The clima(c)tic D-day of the local habitat's rebalancing has D-/decapitated the alien presence of white civilization and reinscribed the coastal strip as the locus of 'Esperance' for its host of Indigenous characters, enabling them to "sing the country afresh" from an epistemologically-valid and

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<sup>102</sup> Devlin-Glass, "Review Essay," 82; Wright ed., *Take Power*; "One Hundred Millenniums Plus Two—Maintaining Traditional Indigenous Geographies. Minus Two Centuries of Lost Life in the Geography of Australian Ignorance," in *Changing Geographies. Essays on Australia*, ed. Susan Ballyn et al. (Barcelona: Centre d'Estudis Australians, Universitat de Barcelona, 2001): 135–143.

<sup>103</sup> Wright, *Carpentaria*, 3. Further page references are in the main text.

environmentally-sound perspective (515–519).<sup>104</sup> Given the current impact of storms, flooding, and mining on the Australian continent's environment and economy, Desperance's lot stands as a metaphor for Australia's destruction by the global capitalist production system, in its direct impact through extraction and indirectly through climate change.

### *Norm Phantom*

Like Kim Scott's *True Country, Carpentaria* functions within the parameters of heteroglossia, displaying the multitudinous presence of local characters in longer and shorter stories. The focus on a life-restoring, ecological, and epistemological understanding of, and respect for, the local environment is given shape through members of Desperance's Indigenous mob. The area's traditional owners tell the most important stories of this contemporary origin myth, and the novel's Indigenous environmentalist agenda is projected mainly through the leader of the town's Indigenous Westside mob.

Normal Phantom's totemic Fish Dreaming is a manifestation of the Rainbow Serpent and responsible for the cyclone that devastates and clears Desperance's materialistic landscape for the future regeneration of Indigenous life and country:

A beach plastered with waste, brown stinking froth and foam where a cyclone had struck. Will [Phantom] was too shocked to move from the realisation of his father's payback to the town. (487)

Normal is a waterman whose inclusive, 'oceanic' sense of self enables him to straddle the forces that move the land and the sea. His totemic Groper Dreaming allows him to participate in a creative interplay between the earthly powers of the Rainbow Serpent, whose tracks shape the river and its surrounding landscape, and the ocean in the

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<sup>104</sup> Desperance's location is marked by the Southern Fish or Fomalhaut star, "the brightest in the constellation Piscis Austrini which followed the water carrier's jug of Aquarius [...] It was the groper who swam from the sea at certain times of the year to the sky and down again, falling back into the shallows of the groper's hole" (515).



Gulf of Carpentaria, which molds the coast (6). According to local wisdom, Norm is a shaman, able to defy storms at sea and return safely where others perish. So untarnished is his reputation that the Desperanians feel compelled to honor his legendary life-saving powers, believed to foster the local fishermen's survival. Thus, in an epistemological twist, the local river's name is changed "from that long deceased imperial Queen to Normal's River" (8; 230).<sup>105</sup> Nevertheless, Norm is also a fringe dweller condemned to living

in the dense Pricklebush scrub on the edge of town [...] a human dumping ground next to the town tip [...] All choked up, living piled together in trash humpies made of tin, cloth, and plastic too, salvaged from the rubbish dump. (4)

The wasteful and harmful effluvia of the Western capitalist mode of production and culture have perverted the natural habitat into a liminal, lethal location which scarcely provides for the dispossessed traditional owners of the area, subsisting by scraping together a meager living from white society's cast-offs. The dump's existence at the margins of the town's invisible safety net—a clever metaphor for the "distance of tolerance" maintained against Indigenous people and "other evils"—allows the maintenance of the artificial race and class boundaries of white Uptown society (100).

However, the site's inscription in figurative death is also marked by the presence of Norm's workshop, which defies the laws of wasteful capitalist accumulation by recycling dead matter into

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<sup>105</sup> Note that just 150 km east of the Gregory river, the Norman river flows through the town of Normanton into the Southern part of the Gulf. Wright also playfully interacts with the latter town's name: "Stuck on local history, the Desperanians desperately adhere to the town's name, derived from its founder, Captain Matthew Desperance Flinders, instead of the new proposed name of Masterton" (59–60). Captain Matthew Flinders is historical: he circumnavigated the Australian coast from 1801–1803, spending some time in the Gulf of Carpentaria. Flinders encouraged the use of the name Australia for the newly-discovered continent. Having circumnavigated Tasmania in 1798–99, he gave his name to Flinders Island, which plays an important role in Mudrooroo's Tasmanian quintet—see "Matthew Flinders," in *A Dictionary of British History* (Oxford UP 2001, 2004; Answers.com, 2009), <http://www.answers.com/topic/matthew-flinders>, accessed 21 July 2009).

perpetual artistic beauty. As befits uncanny locations, Norm's artistic activity projects well beyond his marginal status in Desperance society. While his great skills earn him international fame, the workshop where he has perfected the taxidermic art of bringing fish corpses 'back to life' becomes a place of Gothic haunting for the locals:

Norm told the old people he had a dream about the room. He told them every house had a spirit, and in his house, the spirit's brain lived in the fishroom. The few who heard Norm talk about this theory said it was too far-fetched, but Norm argued that once the spirit consumed the original room, it became the likeness of the room itself. In fact, it was a complete replica of the original room. His story was too strange even for the old people, who in return, accused him of making up stories to frighten them away [...] a haunting that the old people wanted nothing to do with. (205–208)

Through the Groper Dreaming, an Indigenous double of the 'science' of taxidermy, Norm Phantom is powerfully associated with the haunting spirit world. His oxymoronic name plays on his disruptive epistemological status, since his Indigeneity should be the N/norm for the area but is rejected by white Uptown. White sense of place is built on a false sense of history and belonging, and on a lack of lived experience:

Their original forebear, a ghostly white man or woman, simply turned up one day [...] their history was just a half flick of the switch of truth—simply a memory no greater than two life spans. (57)

Desperance's status as an unreal, white ghost town highlights the uncanny irony of the colonizing process that de-normalizes and 'ghosts'—to use Elizabeth Povinelli's term—Indigenous presence into absence.

Indigenous infighting only adds to the imposition of white civilization. In a comic wink to some of the fraudulent materialistic excesses provoked by Native Title legislation, Joseph Midnight's Eastside mob, who occupy the opposite fringe of town, falsely claim

traditional ownership to the area through the invented tribal identity of the Wangabiya, opportunistically using the new mining activity as a springboard for their territorial demands (426). With the local white economy fueling the feud between the two patriarchs, the separation of the mobs has become deeply entrenched. Joseph Midnight seriously undermines Norm's reputation with a Gothic tall tale about a vicious feral pig, Abilene, which Norm is said to set against Midnight's mob:

the ugly head of all of those wild pig stories resurfaced about the ghost of Abilene. Terrible memories were opened up again. The grisly bush deaths in the past two or three decades, which could be counted on one hand, very quickly became exaggerated. (113, 153–154, 318)<sup>106</sup>

His expulsion from Desperance turns Norm into a phantasmagorical non-presence haunting white Uptown. Enraged by the killing of his friend Elias, he sets out on a nautical walkabout to the site of his Groper Dreaming, which develops into the vengeful cyclone that devastates the town.

Norm's songline guides him on a quest that profoundly changes him and reactivates his Indigenous agency. It is a mythic confrontation with the liminal terrain of life and death, challenging not only the racial but also the gendered parameters of his convictions. Norm's reunion with the element of water is chiefly inscribed in the conflictual relationship with his former wife Angel Day.<sup>107</sup> Angel Day's predilection for the town's rubbish tip reads as an ironic metaphor for incomplete Indigenous assimilation to whiteness, condemned to remain 'smudged' and therefore suspect. Thus, Angel's choice for their new homestead clashes with Norm's respect for traditional ways. Perceiving the dump's white effluvia as "haunting spirits," in impotent rage Norm leaves to fish at sea for five

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<sup>106</sup> Abilene was also the name of a nineteenth-century frontier town in the American Wild West, notorious for its crime and lawlessness—see "Abilene," *Britannica Concise Encyclopedia 2006* (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2006; Answers.com, 2009), <http://www.answers.com/topic/abilene-kansas> (accessed 21 July 2009).

<sup>107</sup> Note how Norm's conflict links to Mudrooroo's description of the sea as a male taboo area.

years.<sup>108</sup> The process of Angel's white sell-out reaches a fitting climax with the Bicentennial celebrations, when she commits adultery and leaves her traditional homeland for the poor urban fringe of London; an ominous write-off in the realm of the Dreaming, the text scripts her as a ghostly outcast of both Indigenous and white society (454–455).

Norm's obsession with injustice functions as a metaphor for his failed marriage and is played out in his stormy confrontation with Angel as the "sea lady" (245, 247). This haunting spirit is an uncanny harbinger of death who feeds on the long history of Indigenous war and division and brings destruction in the shape of a devastating storm:

he heard a melancholy swishing monologue humming and drumming the advance of the front moving helter-skelter towards him, while up in the skies, its spiral disappeared into the heavens. Norm, centre stage, prepared himself, for he was a brave man, and he was warrior-like, in readiness to face [the sea lady's] army of mourning ladies. (261–265)

By sticking to the proper's travel line, Norm manages to reach Joseph Midnight's traditional island country after a harrowing voyage, and then has to renegotiate his life with the land in a ritual of sexual joining with bush nature figured as woman. After "their ecstasy was consummated [...] they both curled up in foetal positions on their earth beds, hers of grass, his of sand, and went to sleep." A sense of arrival, rejuvenation, rebirth, and gender and tribal pacification is underscored by the unexpected appearance of his lost grandchild, Bala, "the child of hope," next morning (271–276).

Meanwhile, Norm's mythic battle with the forces of nature—life and death mediated through the four classical elements of earth, air, fire, and water—has developed into a devastating cyclone in retaliation for the death of his white friend Elias. Norm's wrath, however, is inscribed in a larger project of Indigenous recuperation. Indeed, Elias was murdered by the mining company as part of a plot to catch and kill Norm's son Will, an Indigenous activist who

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<sup>108</sup> Wright, *Carpentaria*, 16. Further page references are in the main text.

campaigns against Gurfurrit's environmentally destructive policies. Despite profound differences between father and son concerning political engagement, this frames Norm's vengeful magic within ecological awareness and Indigenous environmentalism. An elusive ghost as well as an environmental terrorist, he is somewhat different from Mudrooroo's nihilistic postcolonizing vampire. Haunting as well as inspiring, destructive as well as productive, ubiquitous as well as elusive, Norm and Will are postcolonizing manifestations of the uncanny,<sup>109</sup> but benign ghosts rather than malignant vampires, as they manage to bend decolonizing violence into Indigenous renewal through the recuperation of the ancient, nurturing links between local country, Indigenous society, and the sacred. This life-restoring engagement is not only figured in the maternal but enters the racial as well.

### *Will Phantom*

Will Phantom, whose name is indicative of his political commitment to the Indigenous cause as well as his ghostly non/presence in Uptown life, is responsible for blowing up the Gurfurrit ore pipeline that dominates the local economy and society. He flees with Mozzie Fishman's traveling convoy on a continental walkabout of Indigenous regeneration which reinstates "a major Law ceremony" along a Dreaming track that follows underground watercourses and reinscribes the Rainbow Serpent's tracks nationwide.<sup>110</sup> Will's absence from Desperance is perceived in haunting terms, similar to Samira Kawash's description of decolonizing violence:

Would Will Phantom return? *Nothing would stop him* now his father was away [...] The great speculation about the explosives and equipment he had in his possession was dragged out of memories, and talked about again with interest bordering on *paranoia*, with new links to *terrorism*.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Kawash, "Terrorists and Vampires," 238–239. See also Chapter 3.

<sup>110</sup> Wright, *Carpentaria*, 119.

<sup>111</sup> *Carpentaria*, 351 (emphasis added).

Will's elusiveness is enhanced by the fact that no photograph of him exists and that as a P/phantom he is "invisible" due to his "too familiar" face. The latter ironically plays on the common racist stereotype that members of a different race all look similar, so you "can't tell them apart, never could."<sup>112</sup>

Unlike Norm, Will chooses his political strategies in response to the changing times. Yet another manifestation of the Rainbow Serpent, he parallels "the real-life separatist guerrilla fighter, Murradoo Yanner," who has actively campaigned against Century Zinc's mining activity on Waanyi land.<sup>113</sup> Their generational conflict typically engages with contemporary issues affecting Indigenous life. In spite of its mythic feel, the novel's timeframe can be tentatively set in the year 2002, fourteen years after the Bicentennial<sup>114</sup> and ten years after Mabo, a moment of neoconservative tenure favorable to the imposition of exploitative mining operations in Australia and detrimental to the rights of traditional ownership:

Over many months, [Will] had watched Gurfurrit play the game of innocence with bumbling front men who broke and won the hearts and minds of more and more of his own relatives and members of their communities, both sides of Desperance. Will did not underestimate those innocent friendly meetings where the mining representatives claimed not to know what was required from Native title claims. He believed the company knew government legislation and procedures related to Indigenous rights like the back of its hand. (391)

*Carpentaria* mirrors the divisions over Native title issues addressed in *Plains of Promise*, when the tribal father opposes his

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<sup>112</sup> *Carpentaria*, 368. Wright plays on this stereotype in other subversive ways as well: one may wonder whether the white Uptown members do look alike as the vast majority already carry the family name Smith.

<sup>113</sup> Ashcroft et al., *Intimate Horizons*, 230. They also comment that Yanner's Rainbow Serpent tattoo appears on *Carpentaria*'s cover, merging with the image of the meandering Leichhardt River (*Carpentaria*, 13–15).

<sup>114</sup> *Carpentaria*, 238. Further page references are in the main text.

uncompromising son over his land rights politics. Norm criticizes Will for his “Southern black rights activism stuff” (351), which relies on what he regards as uprooted urban modernity rather than traditional country and culture.

Importantly, Will further antagonizes his father and tribal law by marrying Hope, Joseph Midnight’s daughter, and fathering their son Bala. Although his sea quest will change his stance, Norm shows himself to be dangerously locked into essentialist visions of Indigeneity in this matter when he dismisses the Midnights for having “bad blood filtering through [their] veins”:

he knew blood like anything, just like a forensic scientist. [Hope] had certain behaviour which was from having bad blood [...] Norm believed someone like Joseph Midnight did not have real blood. It was gammon blood. Thin blood. The kind of weak blood which could not tell fortunes, or make predictions about the future, and could not have premonitions such as if someone was dead or alive, calling out for people to go out and find them [...] Having had all the time in the world to study what he was talking about, he was thankful to God for this opportunity to justify his beliefs. (510–511)

Norm’s understanding that Will’s ‘evil’ influence on traditional culture should be undone at all costs (289) echoes the Elders’ plain rejection of Elliot in *Plains of Promise* and denotes his being captive of a restrictive conception of Indigeneity, whereas Will is more ambiguously positioned between different discourses on Indigeneity:

Will lingered, looking over to where Elias sat, thinking about the town, about being back home. He was beginning to feel as though he had never left being Norm Phantom’s son, who had gone against the conventions of the family and their war. He broke the rules. It was the first time in history, or so it seemed to all and sundry in the Westside Pricklebush. Could it be that he was different? It did concern him to have flaunted responsibility without conviction. Why did he not cart the ancestral, hard-faced warrior demons around on his back as easily as others in his family were prepared to do for land?

[...] "It was good enough for them, why isn't it good enough for me?" (203)

However, Will more positively bears the seed of Indigenous survival than Elliot in reuniting the formerly opposed mobs against the rigid, self-defeating attitude of his father. This empowering union is reflected in naming: 'Will' implies determination; 'Hope' denotes the future; Bala, an Indigenous word for 'brother' or 'fella', suggests brotherhood;<sup>115</sup> and the chapter title "Bala, the child of hope" inscribes the h/Hope for survival in both the patrilineal and the matrilineal.

Typical of the way Wright stretches both the imagination and epistemologies by crossing Dreamtime beliefs and Christian lore, Norm, the "sea king of fishing in the Gulf,"<sup>116</sup> is figured as the pitiful Fisher King. This character from Arthurian myth is the last in a line of keepers of the Holy Grail, allegedly Jesus Christ's cup at the Last Supper. It is also believed to collect Christ's blood at the Crucifixion, and thus to contain miraculous, life-giving powers. All extant versions of the Fisher King's story address the uncanny tension between death's impotence and life's regeneration. Whenever the Fisher King is wounded, generally in the genital region, the fertility of his lands is severely affected, ending up as barren as himself. Unable to move in his state of affliction, the Fisher King's activity is reduced to fishing in the river near his castle. Many knights of different origins attempt to heal him so as to ensure the country's regeneration, but only the chosen one, an Arthurian knight, may do so.<sup>117</sup>

Will may be understood to be this knight. His political activism is a pragmatic reaction to the traditional values of Indigenous society,

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<sup>115</sup> Nonie Sharp, "Fiction (review of *Carpentaria*)," 64.

<sup>116</sup> Wright, *Carpentaria*, 260.

<sup>117</sup> See "grail," in *A Dictionary of World Mythology* (Oxford UP, 1979, 1986, 2003; Answers.com 2009), <http://www.answers.com/topic/holy-grail> (accessed 4 January 2009); "grail," in *The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia*, Sixth Edition (Columbia UP, 2003; Answers.com 2009), <http://www.answers.com/topic/holy-grail> (accessed 04 January 2009); and Weston, Jessie. *From Ritual to Romance* (1920; The Internet Sacred Text Archive, 2008), <http://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/frf/> (accessed 4 January 2009).



based on the outmoded sense of tribal honor exemplified by Norm and Joseph's feud. An updated version of the tribal warrior, he attempts to unite and restore Gulf country by jolting his father, the resigned king of fishing/kingfisher/Fisher King who should "take a reality check on the situation,"<sup>118</sup> back into agency. Confronted with the mining company's ruthless manipulation and extermination of his family, friends, and mob in order to secure its hold over Gulf land, Will has realized that life "had no meaning in this new war on their country":

This was a war that could not be fought on Norm Phantom's and Old Joseph Midnight's terms: where your enemy did not go away and live on the other side of town, and knew the rules of how to fight. This war with the mine had no rules. Nothing was sacred. It was a war for money. (378)

Cornered into fringe dwelling by the local mining's plotting against the Indigenes, Joseph Midnight is the first to overcome the old feud with the Phantoms; "suffering the unrelenting pain of a wrong decision," he adapts to the new times in order to secure survival and supports Will's elusive guerrilla war against the mine (372–373). As a measure of his good intentions, he passes on an important, unused songline to Will so as to recover Hope and Bala from Joseph's traditional island country in the Gulf. They were sent there for protection but possibly used by the Gurfurrit company as bait to trap the elusive 'terrorist'. Joseph's revelation of sacred/secret knowledge seals the gap between the (related) mobs:

The old man gave him the directions to the safe place in his far-off country—a blow-by-blow description sung in song, unravelling a map to a Dreaming place he had never seen [...] old man Midnight remembered a ceremony he had never performed in his life before, and now, to his utter astonishment, he passed it on to Will [...] fully believing he was singing in the right sequence hundreds of places in a

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<sup>118</sup> Wright, *Carpentaria*, 232. Further page references are in the main text.

journey to a place at least a thousand kilometres away across the sea. (375)

Despite their conflict, Norm also offers Will assistance through the realm of the Dreaming. On his walkabout-cum-quest through “kingfisher country,” Will is accompanied by a kingfisher bird which acts as his spiritual guide. The kingfisher is somehow connected to the total destruction of the mine after Will’s capture at sea by mining officials (394–397), and thus announces Desperance’s life-restoring leveling by Norm’s cyclonic rage.

Norm and Will’s characters reconfigure the Holy Grail legend of regeneration into Aboriginal Reality; *Plains of Promise*’s plot of Ivy’s life-giving secret and destructive powers are rescripted along male ascendancy, and the story is shifted to the larger geographical focus of the interplay of country, sky, and sea. In this tale of Indigenous regeneration, a reconstitution of the family line is also imperative to achieve the healing of society and country, which the novel stages through several male quests that circulate through each other. Norm’s nautical walkabout to the site of his Groper Dreaming is triggered off by Elias’s death, and becomes a life-restoring quest to save and protect his grandchild Bala. As the genetic embodiment of the mob’s reunification and survival, Bala represents an Indigenous Holy Grail of ‘royal blood’, which follows a well-known false etymology of the Old French spelling of the original ‘San Gréal’ as ‘Sang Réal’. Will’s quest against the mine becomes a walkabout along Joseph Midnight’s songline, which topographically converges with Norm’s in the attempt to reunite himself with Hope and Bala. While this leads to Will’s capture at sea and abduction to the mine, his liberation by Mozzie Fishman’s mob is topped off with a devastating, orgasmic explosion of the mining complex, magnified by the cyclonic leveling of Desperance. Norm’s recovery of agency engages with race and gender in a tribal manhood of mythic proportions, whose shamanic control of climatic conditions propels the continuation of his son’s quest in search of his wife and grandson.

Significantly, the novel celebrates the finale of Norm and Bala’s odyssey with their return home, now the future site of Indigenous regeneration after the cyclone’s leveling impact. Meanwhile, Will incarnates yet another exhilarating metaphor of environmentally aware Indigenous survival and renewal. Stranded as an Indigenous

Robinson Crusoe on a floating island amalgamated out of Desperance's debris, his ability to reap the fruits of its unexpected fertility lock in with the expectation of his imminent liberation by Hope. She overcomes her fear and initiates her own sea quest to locate him at the novel's close, thus opening up the novelistic space for a constructive female inscription as well. Against the mind-boggling openness of *Plains of Promise's* ending, *Carpentaria* offers hopeful closure and counters the loneliness and lack of connection experienced between Ivy, Mary, and Jessie.

*Mozzie Fishman*

One kinship line that does reflect the problematic sense of belonging addressed in *Plains of Promise's* female trinity is constituted through Angel Day's affair with Mozzie Fishman, which is inscribed in failure and death. As his name suggests, Mozzie/Moses(?) Fishman is an Indigenous Lawman and close friend of Norm's who has embarked upon a crusade through Australia to preach his Indigenous creed:

Big Mozzie Fishman's [...] convoy continued an ancient religious crusade along the spiritual travelling road of the great ancestor, whose journey continues to span the continent and is older than time itself [...] The pilgrims drove the roads knowing they had one aim in life. They were totally responsible for keeping the one Law strong by performing this one ceremony from thousands of creation stories for the guardians of Gondwanaland. (119-124)

Mozzie's name and surname seem to refer to Moses, savior of the Jews after their Egyptian captivity, and to the fishermen who became Jesus' apostles. Marking the breakdown of Indigenous society, Angel's elopement with Mozzie takes place two days after Australia Day in the year of the Bicentennial and sets off Norm's impotent "loss of heart" (238-239). Mozzie and Angel's adulterous relationship only produces two drug-addicted offspring, the petrol sniffers Tristrum Fishman and Junior Fishman Luke. Abandoned to their lot, they live in a car wreck on the fringe of town together with the half-caste Aaron Ho Kum, whose father, Uptown's bartender Lloydie Smith, has rejected both him and his Indigenous mother. Lloydie's denial of the Indigenous reality permeating the town is reflected in his fatal love

for a white chimera—a mermaid presumably living in the wood of his bar counter (472, 490). As with the invisible net, Lloydie's pathetic infatuation is another of the author's skillful, hilarious metaphors for the narrowminded hypocrisy and violence of small-town society in the outback. Such settler communities—as Desperance's mayor and police officer forcefully show—actively participate in the sexual abuse and rape of Indigenous women while officially preaching exclusive whiteness.

Lost between white and Indigenous society, the three boys become the easy target of Uptown's need to impose neat racial boundaries in the face of identitarian threat. The "vicious killing" of the invisible safety net's latest guardian, Gordie, the night when Norm Phantom takes Elias's body back to sea (310) provokes the boys' arrest by the town constable, the oxymoronic Truthful E'Strange. It also leads to a typical episode of Indigenous death in custody at the hands of Mayor Bruiser. This "parvenu who struck it rich through the stock exchange and mining boom" is known to honor his name in employing the motto "*Hit first, talk later*" (34, 327). He consequently imposes his sense of local control, history, and belonging by brute force:

They were dragged into the premises of the lockup, through to the back, into the walled exercise yard, and thrown around the walled space as though they were sacks of potatoes. Like potatoes, the boys just hit the floor and stayed where they fell ... Truthful noticed how abstract their blood looked, as it dripped down from the clean walls and onto the clean concrete floor. A sickening image of cattle being slaughtered flashed across his mind [...] they are starting to look as though they had been put through a mincing machine [...] [Bruiser] was lost in a frenzy. His huge frame stomped from one end of the small exercise yard to the other, while kicking and dragging up one limp sack and throwing it, and another. This struck Truthful in an oblique kind of way as overwhelming reverence towards the search for truth, to the point that it meant killing everyone in the increasingly bloodied yard to find it. (335)

This gory scene, exemplary for the excessive nature of Bruiser's patrol of the borders of an outback town's tenuous sense of identity,

provokes the constable's madness. 'Estranged from the truth' in his desperate denial of the boys' murder, Truthful keeps performing normal daily routines with their corpses in Uptown's jail. Carole Ferrier understands Wright's dark irony in the treatment of white authority figures "as a mode of resistance":

[...] The naming of the cop as 'Truthful' performs particular counter-ideological work here and also operates to raise, in a different form again, the recurring questions posed through Aboriginal writing of fact and fiction, fact and truth.<sup>119</sup>

Indeed, the police officer's insane caretaking of the boys' bodies exposes the brutal consequences of Indigenous dispossession. A sense of their belonging is only restored in the Indigenous burial ceremony that Mozzie conducts for his two biological offspring and adoptive son at his Dreaming site, an "underground sea." The ritual carried out in this "world which Mozzie had kept from them,"<sup>120</sup> and which is reminiscent of the mythical Hades, reflects Elias's sea burial from a perspective of great loss and grief.

### *Elias Smith*

Special mention should be made of Elias, the only white key character in the novel, who reaches Desperance after being shipwrecked as if treading upon water in Christ-like fashion. As we saw earlier, Elijah, from which the name 'Elias' is derived, has often been taken as Jesus' biblical double.<sup>121</sup> A messiah of sorts, Elias's presence is a catalyst for the conflicts involving Desperance's Indigenous and non-Indigenous population. Elias's name and role also hark back to Elliot in *Plains of Promise*, who assumes a similar though darker function in the narrative, and Elias represents an

<sup>119</sup> Ferrier, "Disappearing Memory," 48.

<sup>120</sup> Wright, *Carpentaria*, 438.

<sup>121</sup> See "Elijah," in *Illustrated Dictionary & Concordance of the Bible* (The Jerusalem Publishing House 1986; Answers.com, 2009), <http://www.answers.com/topic/elijah> (accessed 21 July 2009). Also note that Elias bears the surname Smith, which emulates Jesus' first occupation, carpentry (Mark 6:3—see *King James Bible* (University of Michigan Library 18 February 1997), <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/k/kjv/about.html> (accessed 12 Jan. 2009)).

uncannily rewrite of Wright's previous novel's most conflictive male Indigenous character, as well as of the Biblical Savior. Elias's presence in *Carpentaria* addresses the historical and geographical locatedness of identity formation and thus the issue of origins and authenticity regarding the white settlers.

Elias's "hopelessly fight[-] to save his identity" after his memory loss in the shipwreck ironically triggers off "an era of self-analysis not seen in the Gulf for a very long time." This confrontation of Self and Other is caused by the Uptowners' having "originated from nowhere," so that they logically recognize themselves in Elias "appearing from out of nowhere." Their ancestry is strictly measured and limited by generations going back on the local level and therefore lacks substance in comparison to the Aborigines' ancestral roots in country. The novel minimizes the importance of "their original forebear,"

a ghostly white man or woman, [who] simply turned up one day, just like Elias [...] their history was just a half flick of the switch of truth—simply a memory no greater than two life spans.<sup>122</sup>

This white lack of local memory confirms the uncanny contours of white identity formation on the national level, which are rooted in "the great Australian silence."<sup>123</sup> Authenticity in *Carpentaria*'s terms is therefore ecologically located in long-standing nurturing connections to country. On the other hand, the neoconservative thrust to undercut notions of such rootedness through misleading interpretations of local history is an attempt "to demean the Aboriginal people, and who we are in our culture, and to homogenise Australia" in mainstream terms, as Wright says.<sup>124</sup>

Lack of local historical memory also matches Elias's loss of memory as identitarian death through the paralysis of time. Elias's loss of memory in the storm that almost causes his death is

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<sup>122</sup> Wright, *Carpentaria*, 56–75.

<sup>123</sup> W.E.H. Stanner quoted in Bain Attwood, *In the Age of Mabo: History, Aborigines and Australia* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1996): xiv.

<sup>124</sup> Wright, quoted in O'Brien, "Alexis Wright Interview," 217.

symbolically marked by a flash of lightning. It strikes the "trunk of the lightning tree of an important Dreaming story" in Desperance, so that "afterwards, all time stopped"—all local watches and clocks come to a halt and, thus, end up at the town's rubbish tip.<sup>125</sup> The white concept of time is based on linear progress, whose absence implies stasis and death. From a Western perspective, the collapsing of local history into a linear timespan of a mere two generations therefore verges on a deathblow to local Indigenous culture and identity. However, Indigenous time also compresses history but from a cyclical, holistic point of view. In "A Family Document," Alexis Wright explains that "like other Aboriginal people, grandma *collapsed history* and assimilated the remote Dreamtime into the present in order to explain her attachment to country."<sup>126</sup> This implies that Indigenous history, memory, and identity defy Western parameters of separation and contention and recycle themselves continuously; they are at once mythical and real, universal and local, ancient and contemporary, static and dynamic, dead and alive. In *Carpentaria*, this is reflected in the structure of storytelling itself: its temporal

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<sup>125</sup> Wright, *Carpentaria*, 43–44.

<sup>126</sup> Wright footnotes this comment as follows: "Dr M. Reay [...] described the concept of common descent from a common mythic ancestor thus:

Aborigines collapse history and assimilate the remote Dreamtime into the present. Transformations of quasi-ancestral beings are visible in the landscape. Ceremonies re-enact their adventures and their paths are recorded in song. The remote past is ever present. An individual's connection to it is his Dreamings and the land in which his Dreamings are located. The quasi-ancestral beings he shares with his father and the land establish his descent through spirits located in that land from the first people those beings originated [...] when people perform increase rites, singing sacred songs and acting totemic dramas, they, so to say, install themselves as ancestral beings—they actually become totemic ancestors themselves by putting to use the knowledge that they have acquired through long trials of initiation into sacred lore [...] And since the dead, to their normal human aspect, are to a large extent expunged from history, all that remains of them are the mythic identities that they once acted out in ritual. Hence, the dreaming is at once ancient and rarely further back than two generations, since the dead are constantly assimilated to the mythical identity of the country.

—Wright, "A Family Document," 239, emphasis added.

setting is contemporary, but the novel reaches back into the past and into the future with amazing ease. It weaves story into story, expands and contracts time and space at leisure, and challenges the reader to constitute meaning from the bulky, heteroglossic “cacophony”<sup>127</sup> of larger and smaller local voices which wash up on the Gulf’s shore in perpetual tidal motion. Thus, Wright herself defines *Carpentaria* as “a long song, following ancient traditions, reaching back as much as it reached forward, to tell a contemporary story to our ground.”<sup>128</sup>

Indigenous key characters such as Norm, Will, Mozzie Fishman, Joseph Midnight, and Angel Day are inscribed in the aforementioned ‘oceanic’ terms, but, interestingly, Elias is imbued with an all-embracing sense of self as well. His character is mythic as well as human, universal as well as local, larger-than-life as well as realistic, and ancient as well as contemporary. However, this lack of identitarian delimitation also draws him into the uncanny. While he is initially celebrated as a heroic survivor, he is later spurned by Uptown. He “could have been what? An angel carrying the message of the one they called the Almighty? A ghost, spirit, demon or sea monster? Or a man?”<sup>129</sup> His job assignment as the local watchman and “guardian angel” (76) is therefore confined to the town’s liminal area of protection against outside influences, and his responsibility for the “invisible safety net” and the preservation of white Uptown’s feeble integrity conflicts with his lack of personal history. Tying in with contemporary tensions about Australian identity, land rights, and Reconciliation, the town’s obsession with surveillance is “not unexceptional, because everyone in the nation was crazy about peace of mind” (83). Unable to protect the town from harm, Elias is made the scapegoat for the fires and murders instigated by the scheming mining company, and his disturbing presence is exorcized by a drunken “kangaroo court [...] at the pub” in an act of small-town bigotry (90).

Elias’s expulsion from Desperance as well as his later murder at the hands of Gurfurrit are instrumental in Norm’s hybridization, which the taxidermist carries into the reunion of the Phantom and

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<sup>127</sup> Sharrad, “Beyond Capricornia,” 14.

<sup>128</sup> Wright, “On Writing Carpentaria,” 85.

<sup>129</sup> Wright, *Carpentaria*, 62. Further page references are in the main text.



Midnight mobs. Norm and Elias's intimate knowledge of the sea through star navigation, which they share from different though commensurable perspectives, forges a lasting bond. Indeed, Elias is "the only other person in the Gulf waters of Carpentaria whose sea skills match[-] his own," and as "saltwater elective white 'brother[s]'"<sup>130</sup> they often go fishing together. In playful allusion to the Fisher King myth, Elias's departure fuels Norm's decision to "destroy his legend"—he remains on shore and dedicates himself to the taxidermist preservation of dead fish. Norm's determination to renounce his legend also cries out against Uptown's repressive management of local history. The white settlers should not try "to wipe [Elias's] memory from here,"<sup>131</sup> but should use the opportunity provided by the mine's burning of the town records to introduce a "new history of the town that would not be based on *suspended reality*" (89, emphasis added).

Norm is only shaken out of this sulky stasis—reminiscent of Ivy's at Sycamore Heights—by the death of his friend, whose corpse Will has carried from a nearby lagoon to the taxidermist workshop. Thus, Elias's Christ-like sacrifice becomes the vehicle for the reunification of Will and Norm, the Phantom and the Midnight families, and the area's Indigenous mobs with each other and country at large. The appearance of Elias's corpse triggers off Norm's marine walkabout-cum-funeral ceremony:

Elias had come back to tell Norm to take him home. Norm knew if he mapped the route well, he would reach the spirit world, where the congregations of great groopers journeying from the sky to the sea were gathered. The groopers would wait for Norm before they moved on, far away under the sea, before returning to the sea of stars, at the season's end. (236–237)

Elias's corpse words his appeal to life from death on their journey into the Groper Dreaming, and sparks off Norm's struggle to reconcile the male and female principle on their voyage. This conflict

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<sup>130</sup> Ashcroft et al., *Intimate Horizons*, 240.

<sup>131</sup> Wright, *Carpentaria*, 96. Further page references are in the main text.

shifts from an imaginary confrontation with Angel Day to a titanic battle with the sea and bush ladies—the classic elements of water and earth. Elias’s undead ghost, whose cathartic role is played out after initiating Norm’s recovery, can now disappear from the novel; Norm’s Dreaming location becomes the burial site of Elias’s corpse and spirit, to generate new life:

Norm followed the giant fish guiding him [...] he had rowed most of the night, knowing he was nearly on top of the abyss where the fish lived, and the place from where they left to go on their spiritual journeys into the skies. Now he knew this was *real* again [...] He had brought Elias to his final resting place while discovering man could do almost anything if it was meant to be. (251–253)

Perhaps owing to his utter solitariness, uniqueness, and lack of personal history, Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass, and McCredden call Elias “enigmatic” and “mysterious.” They ask:

Is he an allegorical representation of white invasion and separatist indigenous hopes? A prophet in the mould of Elijah, but whose wilderness is the sea rather than the desert? A type of the modern ‘illegal’ refugee refused shelter? Or is his role in the narrative purely a function of plotting?<sup>132</sup>

All these considerations seem valid, and Wright’s storytelling consciously plays on such associations in its effort to engage with different epistemologies in a politics of Indigenous recuperation and sovereignty. However, it is perhaps fitting that, in a novel which celebrates the survival of the Indigenous world in the face of the imposition of Western civilization, a white character should make the ultimate sacrificial gesture that in biblical fashion redeems the Indigenes. This also seems to imply that in matters of Reconciliation, the greater burden should be on the white Australian population, and not on the Indigenous Australians. Wright would surely agree with Kim Scott’s perception of the matter: “And who’s doing all the work,

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<sup>132</sup> Ashcroft et al., *Intimate Horizons*, 238.

all the time, to bridge the gaps? It's Aboriginal people, [...] Trying to help out, to show white people things, to educate, make space for others."<sup>133</sup>

### Toward a Political Ecology of Reconciliation

*Carpentaria* continues the intermingling of the Indigenous and non-Indigenous universes underpinning *Plains of Promise*; yet, it is in its hope-imbued concluding images of Indigenous survival and regeneration that the former is more unambiguously positive. Frances Devlin-Glass claims therefore that it is "a huge advance on her earlier novel: it is less reactive and more proactive in dramatizing indigenous epistemology and knowledge systems."<sup>134</sup> Similarly, Carole Ferrier concludes that in the way

symbol, dream and metaphor are the pervasive modes of Wright's text, and give it much of its haunting power [...] *Carpentaria* strike[s] a note of hope in the remembering and evocation of other frames of reference and notions of time, of past, present and future.<sup>135</sup>

Intended as an evocation of the sovereignty of the Indigenous mind, *Carpentaria* is concerned with the search for an original and authentic Indigenous voice in literature, so the crucial question is: To what extent does it constitute a generic innovation? Ian Syson praises *Carpentaria* as "a remarkable and huge dreamscape novel [...] The range and diversity of form, content and influences [...] [are] astounding." Wondering whether the novel is "a rambling showing-off of Wright's undoubted literary skills [...] a mere pastiche of good ideas" or "a pleasing and important document of our time," he sees it as closest to "an Australian epic."<sup>136</sup> Written in consonance with the parameters of the Indigenous oral tradition, it therefore "replicat[es]

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<sup>133</sup> Scott, "What does it mean to be Aboriginal."

<sup>134</sup> Devlin-Glass, "Review Essay," 82.

<sup>135</sup> Ferrier, "'Disappearing Memory'," 49.

<sup>136</sup> Ian Syson, "Uncertain Magic," *Overland* 187 (Winter 2007): 85.

the story-telling voices of ordinary Aboriginal people whom [Wright] ha[s] heard all [her] life.”<sup>137</sup>

Syson’s analysis resonates with Wright’s own view, as she chooses not to write fiction based on historical fact or personal history so as to avoid a Western encapsulation into realist linearity, progress, finality, and authenticity, but envisages the novel more holistically as “an old saga [...] stories that travel across countries, ceremonies, songs [...] sagas that can take days singing the story of a country.”<sup>138</sup> Within the European literary tradition, a saga can be understood as a “genre of prose narrative” that addresses medieval heroic characters and events from the Scandinavian, especially Icelandic, oral tradition, fictionalized in imaginative accounts employing an elevated style and building on heroism, loyalty, revenge, and action rather than on reflection and inner motivation.<sup>139</sup> Wright’s *Carpentaria* fits these terms regarding its use of the Indigenous oral tradition, Indigenous heroes and leaders, their loyalties and disloyalties, the revenge theme, Indigenous myth and legend, and its creation of a literary habitat through geographical locatedness.

Wright also brings the genre of the epic to bear on *Carpentaria*, and posits that “the everyday Indigenous story world [...] is epic,” combining the merits of the oral tradition reaching back to “the laws, customs and values of our culture” with those of “epic stories of historical events.”<sup>140</sup> Within the European literary tradition, an epic is a “long, narrative poem in an elevated style that celebrates heroic achievement and treats themes of historical, national, religious, or legendary significance.” More specifically,

primary (or traditional) epics are shaped from the legends and traditions of a heroic age and are part of oral tradition; secondary (or literary) epics are written down from the beginning, and their poets adapt aspects of traditional epics. The poems of Homer are usually regarded as the first

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<sup>137</sup> Wright, “On Writing *Carpentaria*,” 84.

<sup>138</sup> “On Writing *Carpentaria*,” 84.

<sup>139</sup> See “saga,” in *Britannica Concise Encyclopedia* (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2006; Answers.com, 2008), <http://www.answers.com/topic/saga> (accessed 29 December 2008).

<sup>140</sup> “On Writing *Carpentaria*,” 80.

important epics and the main source of epic conventions in western Europe. These conventions include the centrality of a hero, sometimes semidivine; an extensive, perhaps cosmic, setting; heroic battle; extended journeying; and the involvement of supernatural beings.<sup>141</sup>

Wright's *Carpentaria* uses epic conventions in celebrating heroic achievements and treating themes of legendary significance such as the destruction of white civilization and the survival of the Indigenous nation. It links the Indigenous oral tradition to the literary, and thus should be seen as a mixed epic. Moreover, it uses the centrality of the hero and his semi-divine character, Norm Phantom, and his ability to influence the weather through the Dreaming against the cosmic setting of the Dreaming as represented in the geographical features of the Gulf of Carpentaria, including its land, sea, and sky. Lastly, heroic battle, as in Norm's struggle with the sea and bush ladies and Will's confrontation with the mine, is joined to a multiplicity of quests by several Indigenous heroes and to the involvement of supernatural beings, such as the sea and bush ladies, and the gropers.

However, Wright highlights *Carpentaria's* uniqueness, in that Indigenous epic is ancient, mythical, historical, and contemporary at once; in other words, by *collapsing* history, the Dreamtime is taken into the present and made part of our contemporary world, blurring the Western distinction between story and history, fact and fiction. Thus, *Carpentaria*, "a novel capable of embracing all times," is, to follow Stanner's cue again,<sup>142</sup> a transgressive 'Everywhen', in that "this fictional work could not be contained in a capsule that was either time or incident specific." Rather, it was meant to be a boundary crosser:

It would not fit into an English, and therefore Australian tradition of creating boundaries and fences which encode the

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<sup>141</sup> See "epic," in *Britannica Concise Encyclopedia* 2006 (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2006; Answers.com, 2008), <http://www.answers.com/topic/epic> (accessed 29 December 2008).

<sup>142</sup> Boyer Lecture 1968.

development of thinking in this country, and which follows through to the containment of thought and idea in the novel [...] The fundamental challenge I wanted to set myself, was to explore ideas that would help us to understand how to re-imagine a larger space than the ones we have been forced to enclose within the imagined borders that have been forced upon us.<sup>143</sup>

The fictional strategy the author chooses is often taken for a local adaptation of South-American Magical-Realist writing; Ian Syson, for instance, understands *Carpentaria* as “a major landmark in that genre,” with Wright “perfect[ing] the art for Australia—giving the magic more indigenous *and* Indigenous sources.” He sees the novel’s plot “lurking [...] at a secondary level [...] nonetheless a strong plot” dealing with small-town racism, police brutality, tribal disruption, and the havoc caused by local mining.<sup>144</sup>

Despite its expansive Indigenous inscription, some critics have pointed out that *Carpentaria* owes to the structure, content, style, and humorous tone of the epic novel *Capricornia*, written some seventy years earlier by the mainstream author Xavier Herbert.<sup>145</sup> Herbert held the post of Chief Protector of the Northern Territory Aborigines for a brief period between 1935 and 1936, and delivered an origin story of the Gulf area from a white settlers’ perspective, dealing with crosscultural contact through the issue of ‘black velvet’. Paul Sharrad notes some parallels suggesting that Wright’s unwritten intention in writing *Carpentaria* was to decolonize Herbert’s text.

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<sup>143</sup> Wright, “On Writing *Carpentaria*,” 81–82.

<sup>144</sup> Syson, “Uncertain Magic,” 85.

<sup>145</sup> See Katharine England, “Small-Town Dreaming,” *The Advertiser* (30 September 2006): Review section 10, [http://infoweb.newsbank.com/iw-search/we/InfoWeb?p\\_product=AWNB&p\\_theme=aggregated5&p\\_action=doc&p\\_docid=11475000229BFC40&p\\_docnum=1&p\\_queryname=14](http://infoweb.newsbank.com/iw-search/we/InfoWeb?p_product=AWNB&p_theme=aggregated5&p_action=doc&p_docid=11475000229BFC40&p_docnum=1&p_queryname=14) (accessed 9 September 2008); Jane Perlez, “Aboriginal Lit,” *New York Times Sunday Book Review* (18 November 2007), <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/18/books/review/Perlez-t.html?fta=y> (accessed 3 May 2008); Pierce, “Calming influence”; Sharrad, “Beyond *Capricornia*”; and Syson, “Uncertain Magic.”

It is not hard to see a transition from Norman to Wright's central character, Normal, just as it is possible to hear an echo in his termagant wife, Angel Day, of Herbert's hotel keeper, Daisy Shay (40). These small intertextual ties serve to show up the more significant relations between the two novels, manifest as corrective surgery from an Aboriginal viewpoint. Although Herbert created something of a scandal for making explicit the then illicit relationships between white and black Australia and revealing the inhuman disregard for the mixed-blood offspring of such connections, his narration is relentlessly external and from a white perspective. If his central concern is the problematic issue of how to treat 'half-caste' Australians, Herbert's anchor character Norman frequently disappears from view for long stretches while obnoxious, hypocritical and ignorant whites take centre stage to be pilloried. Moreover, it is their attitudes and language that dominate the text [...] There is very little room here for a 'Third Space' of undermining sly civility: it is a predominantly dualist world of struggle and death, black and white, seen from a white male perspective, albeit a drily [*sic*] critical one.<sup>146</sup>

These echoes cause *Carpentaria's* authenticity to be inflected by *Capricornia*—albeit only to a certain extent, as Wright never makes allusions to *Capricornia* as a source of inspiration or reference in her interviews and essays regarding her writing, or clarifies whether she has read Herbert's novel. Rather, she holds that she works from the sophistication of the ancient Waanyi storytelling tradition and a

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<sup>146</sup> Sharrad, "Beyond Capricornia," 7–8. Homi Bhabha coins the "third space" in an interview with Jonathan Rutherford, and describes its cultural hybridity in Fanonesque supradialectical terms: "for me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third arises, rather hybridity to me is the 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom"—see Jonathan Rutherford, "The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990): 211.

series of South American, Magical-Realist authors<sup>147</sup> to produce a provocative postcolonizing tale that is familiar as well as strange.

Does the former imply that, rather than Indigenizing the characteristics of a European-style epic, the similarities are just coincidental, off-footing some readers into believing the case for an Australian precedent where none exists? While Peter Pierce notes that “Wright knows well that Xavier Herbert’s comic epic, *Capricornia* (1938), will be on our minds,” Jane Perlez mentions that “Wright said she chose the title ‘Carpentaria’ as a celebration of the ancestral lands that her mother and grandmother, members of the Waanyi nation, were forced from, and not as a nod to Xavier.”<sup>148</sup> This contradiction suggests that Wright insists on *Carpentaria*’s originality out of a concern to “create in writing an *authentic* form of Indigenous storytelling.”<sup>149</sup> She therefore denies the existence of a Western prequel, defies inscription in the Western literary tradition, and insists on an independent Indigenous configuration of truth through fiction. No doubt Wright adopts a trickster stance in maintaining a revelatory silence on the question of *Capricornia*’s presumed precedence. This silence appears politically inspired and embedded in the problem of the uneven balance of power underlying the hybridization of Indigenous and non-Indigenous literary genres and content. It is with both of these fields that the author is obliged to work when transposing the oral into the written.

Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass, and McCredden maintain that the discursive struggle inherent in hybridization tends to raise discomfiting issues of the *Capricornia–Carpentaria* kind:

In Sam Watson’s *The Kadaitcha Sung* and Mudrooroo’s *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* trilogy, Dreamtime tropes are the medium in which the authors satirise colonialism, westernisation or urbanisation [...] In doing so, they deploy literary forms as diverse as magic realism and, in the case of the elder Watson and Mudrooroo, more populist and

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<sup>147</sup> She mentions Carlos Fuentes, Gabriel García Márquez, Édouard Glissant, Eduardo Galeano, and Patrick Chamoiseau as important influences (Wright, “On Writing *Carpentaria*,” 82–83, 85–86; O’Brien, “Alexis Wright Interview,” 216).

<sup>148</sup> Pierce, “Calming influence,” 13.

<sup>149</sup> Ashcroft et al., *Intimate Horizons*, 212–213 (emphasis added).



inventive forms, such as gothic, fantasy thriller and dirty realism. Within western paradigms, such symbolic systems are available for re-use and hybridisation within western genres. However, within both communities questions increasingly arise about the 'authenticity' of the 'translation' of mythic material into western representations.<sup>150</sup>

One may conclude that the objective of authenticity can never be absolute in a global culture—let alone in an isolated culture—and must always be tainted when intercultural communication sets the oral against the written, resting on the incorporation of divergent systems of knowledge and communication. By definition, the end-product 'Indigenous Australian Literature' must be a mixed heritage and collage, although recognizably 'Indigenous' to maintain its claim to a political agenda of enabling self-definition, to follow Michael Dodson's lead.<sup>151</sup> Even if Wright did have prior knowledge of *Capricornia's* content—and Sharrad strongly suggests she did—this does not imply loss of originality, or that her novel is a rewrite of a prequel, or that it lacks substance—in short, that it can be *de-authorized*. The important point is that *Carpentaria* is able to stand out as an independent work of art by the way it draws on and reworks existing cultural traditions. It appears the author has been successful at this, as the prestigious Miles Franklin award may serve to prove. The general public recognition of *Carpentaria's* merits may thus help lay to rest the disturbing ghosts provoked by the *Capricornia* issue.

Wright has an idiosyncratic view of her epic's configuration; she visualizes the novelistic structure and content resulting from "our racial diaspora in Australia" as "a spinning multi-stranded helix of stories":

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<sup>150</sup> *Intimate Horizons*, 212–213. In Mudrooroo's case I'd rather speak of *Dr Wooreddy* (1983) and *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* (1991) only.

<sup>151</sup> Michael Dodson, "The end in the beginning: re(de)finding Aboriginality," in *Blacklines: Contemporary Critical Writing by Indigenous Australians*, ed. Michèle Grossman (1994; Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne UP, 2003): 39. See Chapter 1 and Chapter 3 for relevant quotes from his Wentworth lecture.

[...] The helix of divided strands is forever moving, entwining all stories together [...] relat[ing] to all the leavings and returnings to ancient territory, while carrying the whole human endeavour in search of new dreams.<sup>152</sup>

This structure she sees as open to the inclusion of the “new” Australians. Present in *Carpentaria*, this helix foregrounds the Indigenous perspective within the mutually soliciting coexistence of Indigenous and non-Indigenous epistemologies, mixing Dreamtime, Christian, and classical lore. Frances Devlin-Glass therefore

expect[s] that her Waanyi and Indigenous readers will find the integrity of this work empowering in ways that will disturb white Australia, but that her non-indigenous readers will find it illuminating, if puzzling.<sup>153</sup>

Indeed, readers of *Carpentaria* must work hard to make sense of its heteroglossic tapestry of intermingled accounts in which the true heroes are marginalized Indigenous tribesmen;<sup>154</sup> tribal guerrilla warfare develops into heroic acts; language mixes mainstream English and Indigenous speak; everyday reality blends with the Dreamtime; quests develop out of old and new songlines and walkabouts; and its supernatural powers simultaneously invoke Christian and classical characters and Dreamtime ancestors. It is for the manner in which *Carpentaria*—as well as, tentatively, *Plains of Promise*—imposes a recovery of Indigenous culture and an agenda of Indigenous self-definition and self-determination onto European conventions that it inscribes itself in the peculiarities of the genre tentatively termed Aboriginal Reality in this study.

Similarly, Craig San Roque views the ways in which *Carpentaria* reveals its uncanny, disquieting truths for mainstreamers as unique. Praising Alexis Wright as a masterful, didactic, and generous translator of the unconscious into the conscious, San Roque

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<sup>152</sup> Wright, “On Writing *Carpentaria*,” 84.

<sup>153</sup> Devlin-Glass, “Review Essay,” 83.

<sup>154</sup> Wright says that “my hope was that the novel would allow a space where Indigenous heroes are celebrated” (Wright, “On Writing *Carpentaria*,” 85).

recommends *Carpentaria's* eloquence, deconstructive of Freudian analysis, and highlights its engagement with a country and society fallen upon hard times:

*Carpentaria* is my 'recommended text' mainly because it is a direct counterpoint to Freud's *Totem and Taboo* which draws extensively upon Australian Aboriginal material [...] speaking out about the broken children of Vienna. *Carpentaria* is a psychiatric cultural text. In Oceania, there are many lost thoughts wandering like spirits looking for a thinker.<sup>155</sup>

San Roque's reference to *Totem and Taboo* raises a sensitive point in the discussion of the uncanny, as he positions the novel as the "direct counterpoint" to Freud's essay; *Carpentaria* constitutes a sophisticated, invigorating Indigenous epic tale of origins against the Western sublimation myth of art and science developed by Freud, who, as a male urban-middle-class Central European, developed the discipline of psychiatry using questionable turn-of-the-twentieth-century anthropological sources from Australia.

In Chapter 1 we saw how *Totem and Taboo* spurs not only analysis of the uncanny along the axis of gender, as in Hélène Cixous' approach, but also analysis of race by linking the 'primitive' (figured as the savage, the unconscious, and the repressed) to the ethnic. In Freud's account, it is preeminently in this racial aspect that the structural association of the uncanny with gender (through oedipal blindness, and fear of castration and death) and class (through exclusion from access to post/colonial means of production and accumulation) is substantiated. Through the maintenance of the capital penalty for incestuous behavior, tribal indigenous peoples 'show' that they have not yet managed to control the incest wish, unlike Westerners. As Freud considers the management and sublimation of the oedipal incest wish to be at the root of all human civilization—art, society, religion, justice, ethics—the imposition of patriarchal and colonial authority is conflated and justified; this, in turn, creates a social underclass of 'primitive' 'natives' in alleged need of Western civilization for the management of their so-called

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<sup>155</sup> San Roque, "On Reading *Carpentaria*," 10–13 of 20.

child-like state. Thus, it is mainstream initiative and control that is put in charge of their purported progress and improvement modeled on the example of the West.

Aileen Moreton-Robinson deconstructs the Freudian inscription of white prevalence and privilege from an Indigenous point of view. She writes to this effect that “the belief that the assumption of patriarchal white sovereignty is morally right and legally correct” has a fatal consequence:

The disadvantage suffered by Indigenous people is not perceived as an effect of this assumption; rather, the implication is that indigenous people lack the core values required to contribute to the development of the nation.<sup>156</sup>

In the face of the havoc wrought by the Western irruption into Indigenous Australia, the use of Aboriginal Reality *necessarily* makes *Carpentaria* an antidote to this Freudian account of incomplete, stunted adulthood:

*Carpentaria* should be written as a traditional long story of our times, so the book would appear reminiscent of the style of the oral storytelling that a lot of Indigenous people would find familiar [...] I thought by writing this way, I might contribute something to disrupting the stagnating impulse that visualises the world of Aboriginal people as little more than program upon countless program for ‘fixing up problems’. Surely, we are more than that.<sup>157</sup>

Wright professes to be “very disappointed” with the state of government policies and public resources for Aborigines, of which she said: “I think we’re at an all-time low now.”<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Aileen Moreton-Robinson, “Writing off Indigenous sovereignty: The discourse of security and patriarchal white sovereignty,” in *Sovereign Subjects: Indigenous Sovereignty Matters*, ed. Aileen Moreton-Robinson (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2007): 100.

<sup>157</sup> Wright, “On Writing *Carpentaria*,” 80–81.

<sup>158</sup> O’Brien, “Alexis Wright Interview,” 218. No doubt this comment was partly inspired by the 2007 invasion of the Northern Territory by the conservative

Published under conservative tenure in 2006, *Carpentaria* can be seen to denounce the neocolonial powers in contemporary Australia that marginalize, reify, and stifle the Indigenous world out of agency. Such neocolonialism is given fictional shape through the destructive manipulations of the multinational Gurfurrit mine against Native title and through the stunting impact of small-town racism. In its postcolonizing thrust, the novel activates the uncanny through Dreaming narrative so as to question the race, gender, and class divisions that hold exploitative relationships in place. It engages with readers by proposing a return to a holistic understanding of man and nature, and by creating contemporary storylines and structures recognizably drawing on Australia's oldest cultural heritage: the Indigenous Secret-Sacred.

Wright centers her discourse on an enabling focus from the fringe, but works across different cultural frameworks to create a textual embodiment of "strange cultural survival."<sup>159</sup> Thus, she also engages with the European tradition so as to allow non-Indigenous readership access to the novel, making for a myriad of interpretations that circulate through each other. This blend is manifest in the Rainbow Serpent's Dreaming/nature's powers in the land and sea against the imposition of the stark reality of racist exploitation by white Uptown and the mine. It is evident in the merging of quest, odyssey, songline, and walkabout in the journeying

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Howard government, after insistent rumors and reports about child sexual abuse in remote Aboriginal communities—for detailed criticism of these governmental actions, see *Coercive Reconciliation: Stabilise, Normalise, Exit Aboriginal Australia*, ed. Jon Altman & Melinda Hinkson (North Carlton, Melbourne: Arena 2007). Note also Marcia Langton's statement that "Aboriginal society is sliding into a terminal state of under-development," highlighting "the unassailable facts in hundreds of impoverished Aboriginal communities across remote Australia: radically shortened lives; the highest national rates of unemployment; widespread violence, endemic alcohol and substance abuse; the lowest national levels of education; and lifelong morbidity for hapless citizens suffering from heart disease, nutrition and lifestyle-related diseases such as diabetes"; Langton, "Trapped in the Aboriginal reality show," *Griffith Review* 19 (Autumn 2008): 155, 158.

<sup>159</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, "DissemiNation: Time, narrative, and the margins of the modern nation," in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990): 320.

of Norm, Will, and Mozzie. It also manifests itself in Norm's miraculous recovery from a defeated, ghostly fringe dweller to a maban bridging the forces of life and death. It evinces itself in Will's haunting terrorism in the service of the recovery of the ancestral link to country and Indigenous community. It is addressed in the inscription of the father-son-grandson triad/trinity in the Fisher King myth and Indigenous regeneration. It comes to the fore in the wish-fulfillment of Gurfurrit's and Desperance's destruction and in traditional country's renewal as the signified of the area's ambiguous belonging to end times and new times. It is also apparent in Angel's merging of Christian and Indigenous beliefs and conversion into a white ghost appearing only in dreams. It reveals itself in Elias's biblical sacrifice to redeem a lost Indigenous mob holding on to the spirit of country. And it is, finally, reflected in Lloydie's exchange of 'black velvet' for the fatal love professed for an enchanting siren trapped in the wood of his bar top, perhaps the product of alcoholic delusion.

Highlighting the impact of the Indigenous sacred in contemporary Australian society, Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass, and McCredden wonder about Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs' "startling claim" in *Uncanny Australia* that the relatively modest successes achieved in the struggle of the Indigenous minority to recover sacred sites in the face of powerful mining and agricultural lobbies should seriously affected Australia's definition of its national identity. They ask:

If Aboriginal sacredness is anachronistic in a secularised nation state, why do the tropes of dreamtime narrative seem to command such respect in worlds as diverse as courts of law, museums and keeping places, Aboriginal art galleries world-wide, and more importantly [...] in contemporary literary artefacts?

Positing the Indigenous sacred as a "continuing site of contestation," they trace the powerfully transformative effects of its presence in Australian literature through the trope of the Dreamtime, and cite

Alexis Wright's as well as Kim Scott's fiction as prime examples.<sup>160</sup> Similarly, Craig San Roque understands *Carpentaria* as circulating among readers as a "sacred object," as its composition is "part novel part sacred story" worth visiting from time to time.<sup>161</sup> As an *objet trouvé*, Wright's transforms the perceived beauty of her homeland<sup>162</sup> from a found object of Indigenous spirituality into a *founding subject* of postcolonial identity formation reminiscent of *Benang*'s subversive proliferation on Australian bookshelves and minds.<sup>163</sup> Wright explains elsewhere:

Every word and sentence was worked and reworked many times to give authenticity to the region and to how the people from that region with bad realities might truly feel and dream about impossibility. This authenticity, of how the mind tries to transcend disbelief at the overwhelming effects of an unacceptable history, could be understood as bi-polar: it's there and not there [...] the mind will try to survive by creating alternative narratives and places to visit from time to time, or live in, or believe in, if given the space. *Carpentaria* imagines the cultural mind as sovereign and in control, while freely navigating through the world of colonialism to explore the possibilities of other worlds.<sup>164</sup>

The promiscuous, boundary-crossing character of *Carpentaria* across divisions of race, gender, and class, despite its overriding concern with Indigenous male quests into traditional country, is manifest in the way Norm and Will work toward enabling versions of Indigenous manhood. Thus, Wright's focus on male quest in this novel may also

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<sup>160</sup> Ashcroft et al., *Intimate Horizons*, 205–206. She quotes from Gelder & Jacobs' *Uncanny Australia* (xi). Within this perspective she also discusses Kim Scott's *Benang* and Xavier Herbert's classic *Poor Fellow My Country* (1975; London & Sydney: Fontana, 1976).

<sup>161</sup> San Roque, "On Reading *Carpentaria*," 16 of 20.

<sup>162</sup> The dedication in *Carpentaria* reads: "Inspired by all of the beauty that comes from having an ancient homeland that is deeply loved by those who guard it, and especially by my countrymen, Murrandoo Yanner and Clarence Waldon."

<sup>163</sup> See Chapter 4.

<sup>164</sup> Wright, "On Writing *Carpentaria*," 83–84.

be the result of a wish “to counteract the demonising of Aboriginal men [...], which is beginning to give rise in the dominant ideology to a twenty-first century moral panic,” so that “the female characters in *Carpentaria* are quite peripheral to the action.” Whereas Angel Day’s story of assimilation is reductive in terms of racial/female empowerment, Ferrier highlights the fact that “Hope is tied in to options for change.”<sup>165</sup> Hers is a story of female agency that remains to be told at the novel’s close but inspires H/hope, as she embarks on a quest to retrieve Will from his floating island home, a Noah’s Ark composed of Desperance’s fertile remains. It is a safe reminder that

this object is put together by Alexis in her state as a Waanyi woman, mindful of her grandmothers, and mindful of the girls who will come after her generation. She is composing, at the same time, inside the maturely experienced contemporary state of an Alexis (city woman) Wright.”<sup>166</sup>

The sophistication of Wright’s epic “resistance writing,”<sup>167</sup> a call for the right to self-definition and self-determination, is evident in the ways *Carpentaria* participates in the multicultural complexity of contemporary Australia while steering clear of a crippling discourse on Indigenous authenticity rooted in essentialist identity politics. While recognizing the perceived incommensurability of Indigenous and non-Indigenous epistemologies in its treatment of time and space,<sup>168</sup> *Carpentaria* works toward closing the eurocentric gap between the oral and written, tradition and modernity, nature and human, fact and fiction, past and present, story and history. With its inscription in a holistic cycle of destruction/renewal and life/death through a strategic employment of Dreamtime tropes, *Carpentaria* is a grand “micro-narrative”<sup>169</sup> against the race, gender, and class binaries underlying the Western distinction between Self and Other (or world). Not only do these tropes link to the past, but

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<sup>165</sup> Ferrier, “‘Disappearing Memory,’” 47–49.

<sup>166</sup> San Roque, “On Reading *Carpentaria*,” 16 of 20.

<sup>167</sup> Carole Ferrier, “Aboriginal Women’s Narratives,” in *Gender, Politics, Fiction*, ed. Carole Ferrier (St Lucia: U of Queensland P, 1992): 215.

<sup>168</sup> Devlin-Glass, “Review Essay,” 83.

<sup>169</sup> François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, xxiii–iv.



knowledge and beliefs tied to the Dreaming inform the present and future. Within this system of beliefs there is scope for interpretation and change by individuals through dreams and their lived experiences.<sup>170</sup>

This suggests a dynamic, performative politics of the Indigenous sacred in fiction. As Michael Dodson has it,

the past cannot be dead, because it is built into the beings and bodies of the living. We do not need to re-find the past, because our subjectivities, our being in the world are inseparable from the past. Aboriginalities of today are regenerations and transformations of the spirit of the past, not literal duplications of the past: we re-create Aboriginality in the context of all our experiences, including colonial practices, our oppression and our political struggles.<sup>171</sup>

Foregrounding the importance of an Indigenous epistemology of managing country over Western paradigms but also working toward their reconciliation, Wright holds that "the Gulf country is full of the belief of making what seems impossible possible":

It is this level of belief, of working with your own mind, where all things become possible in a different reality, from thinking for the land, of being the good caretaker for the land that the spirits would stand by you.<sup>172</sup>

From this uncanny perspective of Indigenous truth, which turns white end times into Indigenous new times, she aims for her storytelling to be inclusive:

My Gungalidia countrymen, up in the Gulf country, Murrandoo Yanner and also Clarence Walden, they would always say,

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<sup>170</sup> Moreton-Robinson, "Writing off Indigenous sovereignty," 31.

<sup>171</sup> Dodson, "The end in the beginning," 10.

<sup>172</sup> Wright, "On Writing *Carpentaria*," 92.

“We’re of one heartbeat,” and I hope the book is of one heartbeat. Not only for us, but for everybody in Australia as we move towards the future and try to understand better.<sup>173</sup>

After its positive reception by literary critics, which translated into the novel’s receiving Australia’s most important literary award, one would have hoped—and trusted—that a general readership were equally willing and able to take up and accept *Carpentaria*’s Indigenous challenge to eurocentric paradigms. However, her latest novel, *The Swan Book* (2013), offers a bleaker perspective on a future in blissful coexistence and is clearly written against the backdrop of the Northern Territory Emergency Response. The latter was initiated by the conservative Howard government on the day *Carpentaria* received the Miles Franklin Award in 2007, and has continued with bipartisan support up until now.

### **Sovereignty of the Indigenous-Australian Mind in *The Swan Book***

With *The Swan Book*, yet another instance of resistance writing, Alexis Wright further expands her Indigenous literary universe, deeply rooted in and around the Gulf of Carpentaria in Australia’s remote and thinly populated north. *The Swan Book* is another literary tour de force that continues Wright’s critical engagement with “end times”<sup>174</sup> and speaks back to universalist European epistemology. It relies on the strength of Waanyi oral tradition to paint an apocalyptic view of the Australian continent in the face of the devastating globalizing effects of neocapitalism and the Indigenous lack of, and fight for, political power and control over their lives and country. Thus, *The Swan Book* is a political, economic, and climatic dystopia struggling to regain the environmental and social balance the

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<sup>173</sup> O’Brien, “Alexis Wright Interview,” 218 (emphasis added). Also note Liam Davison’s comment that “Wright’s stories are broadly inclusive even as they challenge the dominance of European versions of the past” (Davison, “A Powerful New Black Voice”). Murrandoo Yanner and Clarence Walden are Waanyi activists to whom the novel is dedicated.

<sup>174</sup> San Roque, “On Reading *Carpentaria*.”

continent once enjoyed but that now has *all* humans, flora, and fauna, under threat, displaced, and suffering.

*The Swan Book* is thus another step up in Wright's literary quest to dissect and understand the ills that affect modern Australia, of which the marginalization and disenfranchisement of the Indigenous peoples are such a significant exponent and integral part. Just as the plight of Australia's Indigenous population can only be understood within the larger framework of the Dreamtime and the disruptions of its delicate balance by mainstream society and culture, *The Swan Book* can only be understood by acknowledging the discursive embedding of any form of fiction within the inherently political nature of literature and its engagement with power structures. The following section will look at Wright's latest novel in the tense context of the struggle for Indigenous sovereignty and the Northern Territory Emergency Response.

### *Swan Book or Swan Song?*

Earlier in this chapter we saw how Wright describes her fiction as "a spinning multi-stranded helix of stories" that can be understood as a fluid, rhizomatic, interlinked whole connecting human to country in search of paths into the future for "first," "old," and "new" Australians.<sup>175</sup> The postcolonizing format of Dreaming narrative she develops into Aboriginal Reality does not work with a straight chronology of beginning, development, and conclusion; rather, it operates with laterality, repetition, and circularity of the plot, and confers as much importance on 'detail' as on 'essential' information. Arguably, this structure reflects an Indigenous way of telling stories and therefore appears in *The Swan Book* as well as *Carpentaria*, being consubstantial with the author's intention to establish a kind of Native title of the mind through the writing of creative fiction, reimagining reality for the Indigenous peoples. In the prelude to *The Swan Book*, whose title "*Ignis Fatuus*" (will-o'-the-wisp, Jack o' lantern) refers to the deceptive, illusory character of observation and perception, Wright's voice merges with that of Oblivia, the novel's main female character, in her attempt to contain the amnesic "virus" that threatens to lure her assimilatively into whiteness:

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<sup>175</sup> Wright, "On Writing *Carpentaria*," 84.

Having learnt now how to escape the reality about this place, *I have created illusionary ancient homelands to encroach on and destroy the wide-open vista of the virus's real-estate.* The prairie house is now surrounded with mountainous foreign countries that dwarf the plains and flatlands in their shadows, and between the mountains there are deserts where a million thirsty people have travelled, and to the coastlines, seas that are stirred by King Kong waves that are like monsters roaring at the front door. Without meeting any resistance whatsoever. I have become a gypsy, addicted to journeys into these distant illusionary homelands, to try to lure the virus somewhere hidden in its own crowded globe to open the door. This is where it begins as far as I am concerned. *This is the quest to regain sovereignty over my own brain.*<sup>176</sup>

The writerly imagination serves to fill out a flat, dry country with detail and relief so as to confuse and undo the panoptic control that the virus of whiteness exerts over the barren, empty plains it commands from a fortified homestead. From an apparently weak position of displacement and dispersal, Wright conceives of herself as an empowered nomad and traveler, becoming a will-o'-the-wisp herself, able to escape and circumvent the imposition of stunting mainstream culture and capable of finding inroads against the forces of assimilation through the illusion of creative fiction.

Further on in the novel, Oblivia will comment on the process of plotting one's way in space as an emotional, intuitive logic rather than a rational process. As we as readers follow Oblivia's steps through the narrative, her wandering or walkabout could be taken as a metaphor for writing the textual landscape itself:

an ordinary, logical route [...] was not the point. If she had walked there herself in the most direct route possible, she would never have found the old genie's shop on the long abandoned street where the city's ghosts came at night, and

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<sup>176</sup> Wright, *The Swan Book*, 4, emphasis added. Further page references are in the main text.

which was best to release swans returning to flight. It was the *desire* she followed, of completing an arduous journey that allowed her to see the right perspective. (262)

In this view, the journey itself is as important as the destination it aims at, and Wright appears to suggest that *how* the journey is made is basic and prior to reaching any destination or final meaning at all. In this metaphorical way, *The Swan Book* reveals different layers of interpretation and multiple points of entry that function crossculturally. Indeed, it takes the elusive trope of the black swan and spins out its multicultural implications to the limit in the quest of Indigenous truth. As Oblivia's totemic Jack o' lantern, it boldly spins afresh and retells the plots of *Plains of Promise* and *Carpentaria*, offering a myriad of views in a never-ending narrative. In this sense, the novel can never be a mere swan song, but operates as an open songline into an uncertain future, as Oblivia's wandering also indicates.

*The Swan Book* is carefully pitched between the pessimism of *Plains of Promise* and the optimism of *Carpentaria*, and adapts and juggles the plot elements of its prequels to strike a sustainable balance. *The Swan Book* revisits the themes of Wright's previous two novels and merges them into a new tale of Indigenous hope and despair. It rehearses *Plains of Promise* in terms of the effects of clima(c)tic change and the life-giving, ontological relationship between Indigeneity and the land and its flora and fauna, its causes and effects being merely on a grander, continental scale. It also addresses its politics of race and gender in the trauma of dispossession, dispersal, removal, and sexual abuse. Central to both *Plains of Promise* and *The Swan Book* are the young, sexually traumatized female protagonist, the displaced waterbirds, and the contaminated lake, their perverted connections to country, and yet, their mutual dependencies.

As with *Plains of Promise's* protagonist Ivy Koopundi, Oblivia Ethyl(ene) Oblivion's life is wrapped in silence, madness, and fear in a destructive downward spiral of race and gender oppression. She is, like Ivy, a victim of rape, not by a white missionary but by ethylene-drugged, out-of-control youngsters from her own mob, which upsets her future as the wife elect to the intended first Indigenous Prime Minister-cum-'savior' of Australia. Like Ivy, Oblivia is tainted by

sexual abuse, and though not responsible for committing what is considered an infringement of taboo or a sin, she is no longer pure—that is, eligible for ‘healthy’ and ‘honorable’ marriage—and so condemned to staying alone, in yet another painful comment on the sexual politics of guilt and shame that have pervaded Indigenous communities so destructively. The shift from missionary authority to black kin in the victimizer role is no doubt conceived in the context prior to the *Little Children Are Sacred* brief (2007), whose reports of child sexual abuse in remote Indigenous communities gave PM Howard and federal government leaders after him the opportunity to permanently militarize the Northern Territory and force an assimilative agenda upon the Indigenous population, who were radically divided by the politics and police action imposed.

Much in the vein of *Carpentaria*, the politics of Indigenous and non-Indigenous land management are critically assessed, with the abuse of natural resources inevitably leading to catastrophic environmental outcomes. Written in the wake of *Carpentaria* and against the backdrop of the Northern Territory Invasion, *The Swan Book* comments directly on the disempowerment, devastation, and corruption that result from any kind of trade-off with non-Indigenous, mainstream society in the struggle for sovereignty:

This was the history of the swamp ever since the wave of conservative thinking began spreading like wildfire across the twenty-first century, when among the mix of political theories and arguments about how to preserve and care for the world’s environment and people, the army was being used in this country to intervene and control the will, mind and soul of the aboriginal people. The military intervention was seen as such an overwhelming success in controlling the Aboriginal world it blinded awareness of the practical failures to make anyone’s life better in the swamp. This ‘closed ear’ dictatorial practice was extended over the decades to suit all shades of grey-colored politics far-away in Canberra, and by tweaking it ever so little this way and that, the intervention of the Army never ended for the swamp people, and for other Aboriginal people like themselves who were sent to detention camps like the swamp to live in until the end of their lives. The internment excluded the swamp people from the United

Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the control proliferated until there was full traction over what these people believed and permeance over their ability to win back their souls and even to define what it meant to be human, without somebody else making the decision for them. (47–48)

In this sense, the novel locks into Kim Scott's reimagining of first-contact history, *That Deadman Dance* (2010), as well as addressing and rewriting Wright's previous two novels. Yet, unlike Scott's penultimate novel, with *The Swan Book* Wright chooses to look back on our present from a future standpoint. Whereas Scott reimagines, with a certain air of nostalgia, the possibilities and deceptions of first-contact Australia as the vantage point for reflection, Wright positions herself in the year 2100 and imagines what Indigenous Australia will look like if neocolonial policies and Indigenous disempowerment and sell-out were to continue for yet another century, thus warning us to change (this crash) course before it is too late for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians alike.

*The Swan Book* therefore reflects, through the plight of Oblivia and her swans, the bleakness of the Intervention in its description of current military control of dysfunctional Indigenous life in Australia's Northern Territory, and adds the severe effects of climate change, racial policy, and neocolonialism on the Australian population at large in a mutually reinforcing, destructive bind:

*When the world changed*, people were different. Towns closed, cities were boarded up, communities abandoned, their governments collapsed. They seemed to have no qualms that were obvious to you and me about walking away from what they called a useless pile of rubbish, and never looking back. Mother Nature? Hah! Who knows how many hearts she could rip out? She never got tired of it. Who knows where on Earth you would find your heart again? People on the road called her the Mother Catastrophe of flood, fire, drought and blizzard. These were the four seasons she threw around the world whenever she liked. In every neck of the woods people walked in the imagination of doomsayers and talked the language of extinction. (6)

Against this fateful backdrop the novel pits the arrival to political power of the first Indigenous Australian Prime Minister, Warren Finch, who is predicted to save the country from disaster and is claimed to embody a balanced Indigenous/non-Indigenous future. The Elders' wish for Warren's arranged marriage with Oblivia, once cherished but abandoned after her rape, joins the very local story of the newly named but contaminated Swan Lake and its displaced inhabitants—reminiscent of *Plains of Promise's* mission mob and the nameless disappearing lake—to the national scene, as Warren, once elected and strengthened in his role of national leader, is unwilling to obey the local Elders' orders. And it is in this translation of the local into the national and continental that *The Swan Book* reveals its greatest strength, showing the mutually nourishing Dreaming connections between the micro and macro levels of life and society—and the devastation caused when its checks and balances are disrupted.

It is on the swampy, contaminated Swan Lake that Oblivia has found shelter and protection with the gypsy Bella Donna of the Champions, an odd female character whose whiteness echoes that of Angel Day in *Carpentaria* and who lives in a derelict old ship's hulk amidst a crowd of rusty "phantom vessels"—detritus left by the military when these tribal lands serve as navy dumping grounds (55). Bella Donna, a nomadic gypsy woman expelled by persecution and dispossession from Old Europe who claims to have one day been saved by a white swan, teaches Oblivia her "foreigner's *Dreaming*" to control the newly arrived black swans, expelled from their former habitat by insistent drought (16). It is also she who recovers Oblivia from the hole in a eucalyptus tree where she has been hiding and sleeping/forgetting after her traumatic sexual abuse, "like that Rip van Winkle fella of the fairy tale time" (7).<sup>177</sup> Her story has been

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<sup>177</sup> The Rip Van Winkle tale, a short story written by Washington Irving in 1819, tells how Rip, a somewhat lazy farmer of Dutch ancestry, sleeps for twenty years after drinking moonshine with what seems to be a group of Dutch first settlers in the hills around his village in the Catskills. When he wakes up and returns home, his fellow townspeople no longer recognize him, and it takes some time for him to realize that he has actually slept through the American Revolution, which provokes the villagers' jealousy, as they would have liked to do without the



turned into local myth by the Aborigines and, reminiscent of *Plains of Promise*, relates her trauma causally to man-made local and continental climate change after white settlement:

Some say there was an accident before the drought. A little girl was lost. She had fallen into the deep underground bowel of a giant eucalyptus tree. In a silent world, the girl slept for a very long time among the trees huge woven roots. Everyone had forgotten that she even existed [...] This happened during the massive sand storms that cursed the place after the arrival of the strangers from the sea. (7-8)

Oblivia enjoys a special relationship with the Lake's black swans, which seek her company after being pushed north from the drought-ridden south. The Aborigines regard the black swans as alien to the swamp, as "there was no song for swans" (14), but having reached beyond the end of their songline, the beautiful birds have become permanent exiles like Oblivia. They are an omen, a "paragon of anxious premonitions," implicated in damaging difference "rather than a miracle for saving the world" (14). Associated with the "strange and unfamiliar" (15) and yet bent on making the lake their home, they enhance the sensation of madness, being "*Warraku*" (14): that is, projected onto Oblivia's outsider status. The black swans' forced migration functions as a metaphor for the dire effects of Indigenous dispersal, disempowerment, and death in the area but also denotes the devastating effects of the mainstream mismanagement of the land in general. An ambiguous symbol of un/belonging, the swans take the place of the dangerous black crows in *Plains of Promise's* disappearing lake, whose life-giving secret ultimately occupies its dramatic action.

The solution to the disruption of the Dreaming was once sought in the now discarded union of Warren and Oblivia, but as in *Plains of Promise*, the local Elders merely act out of a sense of protection toward the boy and girl once chosen to lead the country to survival and regeneration. Yet, the possibility of regenerating country, so

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Revolution's hardships. The irony here is that Oblivia, unlike Rip, falls asleep precisely to forget her traumatic hardships.

intimately linked to the purity of the sexual deed and the female body, seems now forever lost, with Oblivia cast into silence, forgetfulness, and madness. The far-reaching consequences of Oblivia's rape and the general sense of tribal fragmentation on and around the swamp renamed as Swan Lake are rewrites of the themes of gendered and racial violence that inform *Plains of Promise*. Ivy's madness and outcast status are the result of her abuse by Missioner Jipp as well as of the transgenerational sexual trauma caused by the frontier practice of 'black velvet', all of which leads to the dramatic crises in the novel centering on reestablishing the balance in country as it existed prior to contact with the white man.

Warren Finch's behavior recalls Elliott Pugnose's rebellious attitude in *Plains of Promise*. In his search for Indigenous manifest destiny, Warren defies the Elders' designs by insisting on marrying Oblivia. Thus, he forces her to join him to the City, where she is to lead a secluded life locked away in his apartment while he dedicates himself to the political game, only flaunting her in public when this is advantageous to his agenda. Yet, post-apocalyptic Melbourne ultimately proves a deadly trap when Warren is assassinated shortly after the betrothal. It causes Oblivia to flee back to the Lake in the company of her flock of black swans to reestablish the nourishing links with country she had to forsake in coming to the dismal Garden City, where lost, poverty-stricken humans dwell and the few wealthy and powerful reside in gated seclusion. The City is "a foggy maze of concrete industrial buildings, high-rise offices, factories and houses," devoid of birds, cracking at the seams and full of beggars (208-209), which spells utter distrust in the results of political action when played according to the corrupt rules of the democratic mainstream game.

Warren Finch parades as a power-hungry, masculinist Indigenous parvenu who musters little sympathy as the 'savior' of Australia, be it Indigenous or non-Indigenous (185). At first glance, Finch appears as an empowered and more sophisticated rewrite of Buddy Doolan in *Plains of Promise*, but more disturbing links can be established with real-life politicians in a composite of several contemporary Indigenous leaders of controversial reputation. Notably, Warren may be inspired by his namesake Warren Mundine, the President of the Indigenous Advisory Council appointed by the late, conservative Abbott Government, associated as he is with moral corruption after

his long involvement with Australian Labor as the party’s National President and his subsequent defection to the Conservative party. Finch’s characterization as an empowered, capitalist sell-out also recalls the Cape-York activist Noel Pearson, whose singular opinions on Indigenous dysfunctionality and its remedies supported PM John Howard’s intervention in the Northern Territory after the *Little Children Are Sacred* report was published. As Raimond Gaita writes, “It [the Intervention] probably could not have happened without Pearson: not the intervention itself, nor the broad consent to it” (Gaita 2007: p. 297). To many an observer, Howard’s assimilationist, neocolonialist bid to save Indigenous children stands as a perverse scheme that blatantly cashes in on the Stolen Generations plight to disenfranchise remote Indigenous communities.

Wright gives another, environmental clue to her view of Indigenous leaders going mainstream: the finch, Warren’s family name, is a European songbird whose everydayness and small size contrast with the exceptionality and beauty of the native black swans. Also, Warren’s first name may connote either a breeding pen for rabbits or the complex maze of burrows with which this imported European pest undermines the Australian habitat. In other words, it refers to a negative site of containment, delusion, and disorientation, which seems to connect with the sense of coopting that the Indigenous leader conveys. On the other hand, an intriguing take on the centrality of the black swans in the novel is Derrida’s use of the bird trope to denote true friendship, forged by secrets that cannot be shared with anyone else; such friends are necessarily as rare or impossible to find as black swans were thought to be in pre-Enlightenment European thought. The importance and sacredness of secrecy in Derrida’s reflections on friendship link up with Indigenous notions of custodianship and point to the relationship of intimate trust between the black swans and Oblivia—an intimacy she can never share with Finch. We also saw in the previous chapter how Derrida’s work on Kant and friendship deals with the latter’s notion of cosmopolitanism (*Weltbürgerschaft*), which underpins hospitality. It is Kim Scott’s *That Deadman Dance* that ends up being a profound reflection on hospitality in the colonial encounter and how it may revert to enmity (‘hostipitality’, in Derrida’s coinage) and defeat owing to the unequal distribution of power and the racializing discourse that undermine the precept of Indigenous sovereignty.

Both Wright and Scott appear to be writing back to the Enlightenment construction and postmodern deconstruction of Europe from their embodied, postcolonizing location in Australia.

Through the black swans, Wright not only highlights the existence of an incommensurable Indigenous world on Australian soil but also illustrates the incongruence and inappropriateness of Warren Finch's arranged marriage with Oblivia, who is inseparably associated with the lake's black swans through the Dreaming; her strong natural connection and outcast status as a human are poised against Warren's materialistic, self-interested drives and convictions. Wright ultimately debunks the myth of powerful male Indigenous leadership<sup>178</sup> in the description of Finch's funeral rites, a "Travelling Road Show" (284) commercialized for the tourist industry and grounded in the iron laws of capitalist production and consumption through the use of a cooled long-haul delivery truck as his hearse. In the chapter entitled "The Ghost Walk" (293), Warren's body is readied for a mocking "last lap of honour," and the irony of Warren's sobriquet "The Spirit of the Nation" in his move from vital essence to ghostly presence will not be lost on the reader:

The coffin was soon popped in the deep freezer of the *Fresh Food People* long-haul semitrailer attached to the Mack's cab—now painted up in blue, red and white, as though draped with the nation's flag [...] The *See You Around* journey was for all people who bothered to stand out in a chilly night, or in the midday sun, if they cared enough to line the streets just to watch the *Spirit of the Nation* roaring by [...] the clockwork nature of the thing was to keep the *Fresh Food People's* schedule of deliveries to its supermarket chain throughout the country. (294–297)

The closing chapters see Oblivia's safe return to the Swan Lake after a long, hazardous journey in the company of her swans. From this moment on, the scene shifts to the eternal movements of the

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<sup>178</sup> Note that Alexis Wright's latest publication, *Tracker* (2017), is the biography of, and homage to, an enabling and empowering Indigenous male leader, the activist Tracker Tilmouth, recently deceased.

natural cycle: wet and drought, life and death alternate and the story of the disappearing and reappearing swans is cast in a timeless, distancing Dreamtime perspective of constant renewal. This takes us back to Elliot Pugnose's waterbird fable that closes, informs, and summarizes *Plains of Promise*. *The Swan Book's* epilogue equally terminates in a mythical tale that ties the end to the beginning and projects the cycle of life, based on the alternating absence and presence of water, that most female of the classic four elements:

Having lived in the dry country for several thousands of years, the ghostly spectre of the drought woman had seen as many generations born and die and when those beautiful swans rose up one day to the skies and disappeared, it broke the water lilies and weed-covered lagoon, pulled itself out of its resting place, and filled the atmosphere from coastline to coastline of rotted tree stumps, flat plains, or solemn river bends across the country. Then it continued in the southerly direction the birds had flown. In its far-flung search for the swans, the slow-moving drought left behind smouldering ashes and soil baked by the dryness, and the whole country looking as though it had been turned over with a pick and flattened with a shovel. When the swans were found, the drought turned around on its hot heels and howling winds, while fires blew smoke across the lands on fast moving currents, and came back to the. (330)

A sense of return to origins and resolution is achieved in Oblivia's address of the personified drought, which may hold the key to a better future and follows directly on the passage just quoted. She now commands the drought woman to be hospitable to the last displaced fledgling swan that Oblivia is having under her wings and that she calls "Stranger." The Derridean framework of 'hostipitality' suggests itself in the choice of words and scene, which denotes her recovery of initiative and a healing of sorts after long years of depression, oblivion, and sullenness:

Oblivia claimed that party time was over at the dustbowl, and told the drought she was jack sick of it. *You got your old job back. I am giving this lasts swan to you, and to tell you the truth*

*of the matter, I am done with carrying it around with me. You look after this swan, she ordered. His name is Stranger. Thinks he doesn't belong in drought country. See if you can make more swans of this, old pensioner. (297)*

*The In/Hospitable Text: Rara Avis in Terris Nigroque Simillima Cygno*

Set in the traditional country from which her mob has largely been removed in the process of colonization, *The Swan Book* recovers, maintains, and reinvents the cultural memory and spiritual connection of Wright's "distant illusionary homelands" (4) through storytelling. Like *Carpentaria*, it adapts the iconic Western epic form to create an Indigenous sense of community emanating from country and its embodied cultural practices. Wright's fiction can be seen to operate on the disturbing edges of cultural tradition and performance, beckoning toward a sort of Indigenous incommensurability with mainstream understandings of reality while actively engaging with, and soliciting, the non-Indigenous community. This incommensurability is, of course, intended to create a discursive space and place where Indigeneity can come to terms with itself and achieve a sovereignty in mind and body within and beyond the larger framework of the Australian nation-state. As Wright states in "The Politics of Writing," she writes first and foremost for her own community, but from this position she also wants to be heard beyond, by the Australian mainstream and the larger international readership (19), making "a call for mercy,"

a call for some understanding of what has been happening to people, what our condition is" as well as claiming the physical time and discursive space "to give us a chance to change."<sup>179</sup>

Understood from such a perspective, incommensurability is more than a cultural given: it serves a concrete political purpose. Readers of *The Swan Book* should be willing to let themselves drift on its endless streams of narrative threads which loop back and forth,

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<sup>179</sup> Wright, quoted in Ravenscroft, "Politics of Exposure," 79–80.

circle through each other, and meander toward a form of resolution across the material and spiritual, across time and space, merging past, present, and future as well as the local and continental into a holistic Indigenous universe. The non-Indigenous reading experience thus becomes a matter of "trust" in the text and its author, as Alison Ravenscroft<sup>180</sup> put it when speaking of the novel's prequel, *Carpentaria*, and so acknowledges Indigenous primacy in the hosting of any distinctly-Australian textscape. It is a defamiliarizing encounter with the Indigenous Other in a reversal of textual ownership—a recovery of intellectual sovereignty—that confirms the ways Aboriginal Australians have been legally written back into the landscape and put back on the postcolonial map after more than two centuries of white colonization and dispossession. This literary configuration of intellectual sovereignty is on a par with a contemporary political process that is now culminating in a call for a national referendum on the position of the Indigenous population in the Australian Constitution based on the premise that they are First Nations that never ceded their sovereignty to the Crown, as the 2017 Uluru Statement from the Heart states.

Texts such as *The Swan Book* require of white readers an acknowledgement that they are visiting unknown and uncharted narrative territory—Aboriginal Reality, in Wright's informal coinage of the term. They must also relinquish established, canonical values regarding reading practices and the interpretation of fiction, which becomes the only way to make sense of the textual landscape, the Indigenous Other, and themselves. This is a point Ravenscroft further elaborates in *The Postcolonial Eye* (2012) and which I also make in a 2002 paper on *Plains of Promise* when critiquing its Magical-Realist emplacement by mainstream scholars; there is a strong and evident case for intercultural respect and for the refusal to incorporate the Indigenous sacred and Dreaming into a European epistemology of understanding the world—at heart, the kind of assimilation that is structurally projected on all fronts of the public realm of the Australian nation-state onto the disempowered and disenfranchised

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<sup>180</sup> Ravenscroft, "When the Narrator's Art Matches the Magical Storytelling," A2, A22.

<sup>180</sup> *Final Report of the Referendum Council*. Commonwealth of Australia 2017: i, <https://www.referendumcouncil.org.au/final-report> (accessed 6 May 2018).

segments of the Indigenous population, notably in the remote Northern Territory, where the federal government imposes a strict policy of assimilation.

Adapting Derrida's work on hospitality<sup>181</sup> to my purpose, the postcolonizing literary text may be considered an inhospitable territory, only becoming hospitable when its alterity, its 'other' internal logic, is respected. Therefore, Indigenous incommensurability cannot be assimilated on the premise of its ontological denial but must be acknowledged as coexistent and engaging with the Western world, even if it solicits and denies the latter's bases of interpretation. In an instance of mental native title, of intellectual sovereignty, the other text can only befriend the European/mainstream reader provided the latter observes the rules of the Indigenous host text—the sovereignty of its content and structure. There is no amicable relation, no friendship possible, between text and reader without such respect and the attempt at empathy, lest postcolonial blindness results.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Derrida bases his deconstructive approach to hospitality on the groundwork laid by Immanuel Kant, the German Enlightenment philosopher and central figure of modern Western philosophy, who published his tract *Perpetual Peace*<sup>182</sup> shortly after British colonization had started in Australia. No doubt Kant's timing was significant within the sustained imperial effort of the day to colonize foreign territories and the resistance this generated in the lands thus occupied. Kant, a supporter of the American and French Revolutions, makes an optimistic argument for universal democracy and international cooperation through the concept of cosmopolitanism (*Weltbürgerschaft* or world citizenship). Kant posits that, in the cosmopolitan guest-host relationship, "hospitality [*l'hospitalité* (*hospitalitas*)] means the right of a stranger not to be treated with hostility when he arrives on someone else's territory." Kant foregrounds his conviction that all humans share the right to occupy

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<sup>181</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Hostipitality," 3–18; "The Principle of Hospitality," *Parallax* 11.1 (2005): 6–9.

<sup>182</sup> In Immanuel Kant, *Kant's Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1970): 93–130.



the surface of the Earth, whose finiteness dictates a universal obligation to extend hospitality to strangers when they enter a foreign country. Kant also points out that, while such a right is limited by the very presence, existence, and sovereignty of the Other, the civil, diplomatic terms of hospitality are denied and trodden on by the colonial enterprise.<sup>183</sup>

To recapitulate: the British imperial project for Australia based itself on *terra nullius* or the erroneous belief in the absence of *human* habitation and therefore justified the absence of recognition of, and treaties with, the Indigenous peoples. Confronted with the abnegation of humanity, imposition of Western civilization, and capitalist denial of Indigenous sovereignty, the very right to hospitality ends up being employed against those who share their land with the colonial invader, as my discussion of *That Deadman Dance* has argued. Hospitality becomes what Derrida ambiguously terms "hostipitality," an uncanny combination of hospitality and hostility that etymologically folds back onto itself:

The welcomed guest [*hôte*] is a stranger treated as a friend or ally, as opposed to the stranger treated as an enemy (friend/enemy, hospitality/hostility). The pair we will continue to speak of, hospitality/hostility, is in place.<sup>184</sup>

In his exposition of Kant's thought, Derrida insists on the negotiated nature of hospitality, which leads him to elaborate on the nature of philanthropy and true friendship, which may take us into a more detailed discussion of *The Swan Book*. According to Derrida, there is nothing "sentimental" about hospitality; the love of humanity underpinning hospitality is firmly embedded in obligation, rights, and duty and even given legal shape thereby, beyond mere philanthropy.

Derrida expands on this in *The Politics of Friendship* in a passage devoted to the trope of the black swan.<sup>185</sup> What differentiates the Kantian "friend of man" from the philanthropist, and how does the

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<sup>183</sup> Derrida, "Hostipitality," 5.

<sup>184</sup> Derrida, "Hostipitality," 4.

<sup>185</sup> Derrida, "Hostipitality," 4, last emphasis added.

former relate to “a black swan”? Derrida explains that Kant locates the *Menschenfreund* or “friend of man” as an Enlightened manifestation of the “philanthropist” who is inspired by a rational “Idea” as well as sentimental love of all humankind. Kant’s rational approach to love is based on the concepts of freedom, equality, and brotherhood, proleptic elements anticipating the ideals of the American and French Revolutions.<sup>186</sup> The distinction is of importance because it underpins his rationalist discussion of cosmopolitanism and hospitality in terms of mutual rights, obligations, and duties beyond philanthropy, and so grounds the principle of individual sovereignty. According to Derrida, Kant is wary of excessive love, intimacy, and tenderness in interhuman contact, as it leads to “reciprocal possession and fusion” and thus, paradoxically, to “rupture.” An absolute moral disorder results from too much love, which becomes suffocating and thus (self)destructive. In simple words, “too much love separates, threatens the social bond”—the individual ceases to exist, and the “death instinct” prevails as a “demonic principle” (256). Still following Kant, if love is uncanny at heart, because it is both the “evil” and the “remedy to evil,” then either to “abandon unto oneself or unto the other” is the enemy, and rules of conduct and contention should hold the self in place against and through the other. In Derrida’s vision, Kant captures the innate complexity of human relationships, which cannot prosper if we are either too distant or too close for comfort. The individual may exist only as a sovereign self because he/she stands and acts in relation to the other; consequently, the sovereign self implies the existence of the sovereign other. Paradoxically, it is in sociality that we find our individuality: one generates the other.

So, on this latter note, is the true “friend of man” who inspires Kant’s model of cosmopolitanism and hospitality possible? According to Derrida it is, but as “a black swan.” We have to go back to the Classics to understand his meaning. The Roman poet Juvenal was first to employ the trope of the black swan, in one of his satires: *Rara avis in terris nigroque simillima cygno*,<sup>187</sup> which translates as “a bird

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<sup>186</sup> Cf. Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship* (1997. London & New York: Verso, 2006): 260–261. Further page references are in the main text.

<sup>187</sup> Juvenal, *Satires*, Book II, Satire 6, line 165.

as rare upon the earth as a black swan." The black swan is a classical metaphor denoting a phenomenon believed impossible to exist at some stage but subsequently proven to be real: an academic *ignis fatuus* or will-o'-the-wisp of sorts. The black swan was once considered a marvelous, imaginary creature until it was incorporated, incarnated from the real of fantasy, as a living species when Europe started exploring beyond its own (epistemological) borders.

As true friends are hard, if not impossible, to find, in the Derridean framework the black swan symbolizes the shared secrets that allow true friends to maintain a bond of absolute trust—their secrets are as hidden and invisible as the black swan: unseen and elusive, their presence is felt in their absence. A true friend is a person one can trust with their innermost secrets, potentially harmful and sensitive knowledge that should never come to light. This makes the black swan a paradigmatic manifestation of the uncanny. Secrecy forms part and parcel of the "absolute confidence" in the other without which true friendship cannot exist,<sup>188</sup> without which the host cannot invite the guest and make the other at home. That is to say, "the secret is not, fundamentally, an object of knowledge" (259), for the secret, in being a secret, may not be revealed lest the bond of true friendship be broken. The secret delineates the limits of the social bond; the secret is unknowable, hence sublime and therefore sacred. The secret homes in on respect for difference, and therefore the sacred; keeping the secret is a sacred duty that forges true friendship and so forges the social bond between the self and the other.

This takes us to an Indigenous understanding of culture, for what is more secret and sacred than the Dreaming, a 'black swan' whose knowability is organized in terms of Indigenous custodianship and initiation? We could argue that owing to the sacred character of secrecy, true friends are extremely rare—a *rara avis*. Derrida says there is "no friendship without the possibility of absolute secrecy. A friend worthy of such secrecy is as improbable, and perhaps impossible to find, as a black swan" (258). Used ironically, for 1,500 years in the European imagination the black swan was a common

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<sup>188</sup> Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, 257. Further page references are in the main text.

metaphor for the outlandish and impossible. Likewise, the saying 'all swans are white' had been used until the late Renaissance as a proverbial example of a well-known truth. In the Australian context, the presumed non-existence of such a strange but beautiful bird must be juxtaposed with the sighting of the first black swans by Europeans upon arriving on the west coast of seventeenth-century Australia. Until then black swans had existed only as a figment of the European imagination, but they were and are in fact a living and thriving native Australian species. Since then, Juvenal's phrase has denoted the fragility of any system of thought: they shatter if one of their premises can be disproven. In our case, the spotting of black swans on the Australian continent would question the Western worldview of Australia, whose all-too-real otherness had been relegated to the realm of fantasy in the European mind. To follow Derrida through, Indigenous Australia is the black swan, and Indigenous Australian literature is the black swan's book. In Derrida's mother tongue, French, black swan ('*cygne noir*') coincides phonetically with dark sign or black sign ('*signe noir*'), so that the black swan is the symbol of the uncanny: it is the sign that signifies life and the non-sign that denotes death; the material vs the spectral; epistemological presence vs absence; a Black whole vs a Black hole.

#### *A Black Swan Called Olivia*

One can easily see why the trope of the black swan must have been attractive to Wright, as it connects alterity to the material world and blackness to beauty from an incommensurable Dreaming location. Juvenal's quip has an obvious colonial connotation in its Australian context, in that it plays on skin color if we may equate the blackness of the swans with Australian Indigeneity—and Wright must have had this obvious connection in mind, as she is aware of the trope's existence. The traditional European notion that all swans were white was dictated by the historical record, but this was belied by the unexpected 'discovery' of the dark Australian variant by the Dutch explorer Willem de Vlamingh in 1697. The latter discovery challenged the biased blindness of Western epistemology, based on a series of binaries that linked white and black, fair and dark, beautiful and ugly, good and bad, civilized and savage, and so on, and thus presumed that such graceful creatures as swans could not be

black. This questioning, in turn, subverts the colonial equation of white skin with humanity and civility. Or, to put it differently, a swan remains a swan independent of its color, and so it is with humans.

Wright exploits the metaphor's implications by citing both Juvenal and de Vlamingh in the novel, and bends this to her own epistemological needs and deconstructive purposes. She first takes issue with the conceptual limitations of the language of empire when she juxtaposes Latin and English as the Old and New World language, and creates an outrageous example of linguistic b(l)ack-colonization triggered by the manifestation of the black swan, denied by the Classics but now spurring the Swan Lake dwellers to speak Latin and believe themselves "Latino Aborigines":<sup>189</sup>

it terminated their ability to speak good English anymore, and to teach their children to speak English properly so that the gap could finally be closed between Aboriginal people and Australia [...] All wanted to go to Rome to live with the Pope. Some people even claimed that the swamp was Rome [...] How bold to mix the Dreamings. Those laws of the two sides of the local world were always clashing.

This ironic episode is immediately followed by a further elucidation of the philosophical impact of the black swan sighting, which went down in history as "*the epiphany of the black swan*'—a celebration for science, a fact stripped from myth" (81).<sup>190</sup>

The ontological trope of the black swan chimes with a revenant Indigenous universe suppressed in, but actively engaging with, mainstream reality; it informs the text's content and agenda deeply, as the black swans are intimately linked to the female Indigenous protagonist, Oblivia, who is silenced by trauma and condemned to a secrecy elevated to the status of the sacred so she can cope with the emotional damage inflicted by rape. As her full name indicates, Oblivia Ethylene Oblivion's sullen silence is not a rational decision to deal with the trauma of dispossession (of her body, her womanhood, her Indigeneity, her self-respect) but an emotionally crippling cul-de-

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<sup>189</sup> Wright, *The Swan Book*, 80. Further page references are in the main text.

<sup>190</sup> Original emphasis, denoting Bella Donna speaking.

sac. It is an extradiscursive, extralinguistic niche which is expressed in the womb-like hole in a sacred eucalyptus tree from which she is willy-nilly 'reborn' after having disappeared for years, Rip van Winkle style (7); it is also a niche from which she haunts her people with the sin committed against her bodily integrity, which denotes the disturbed relationship between country and its Indigenous custodians: Olivia "has never recovered from being raped [...] the problem of the speechless child" (19–20). To her, silence, oblivion, secrecy, and sacredness equal self-protection, a ghostly place as well as a living space. Like Ivy Koopundi in *Plains of Promise*, Oblivia is linked to the swampy lake in a super/natural way, with the force of the Dreaming, an origin myth. The displaced black swans, the totemic manifestation of her Dreaming, are Oblivia's only true friends in a silent-secret-sacred bond that allows her to survive the imposition of white civilization emanating from the continent's urban centers and the concomitant onslaught of Indigenous dysfunctionality in remote Australia. Her journey to the center of evil, an apocalyptic Melbourne, and back to Swan Lake in the company of the black swans becomes a literal and metaphorical tour de force showing the resilience of country. Indeed, it is through the black swans that she can communicate with the land—the black swans *are* her country, and thus they *are* Oblivia. And Oblivia is as spectral as the swans are; silent, mysterious, mythic, ungraspable, a super/natural force of life and regeneration that has been tampered with and now puts a spell on her people. Inevitably stepping into the tracks of the European tradition, she has become Ignis Fatuus, the Foolish Fire or Will-o'-the-Wisp (7): the atmospheric ghost lights over swamps in European folklore that lure incautious travelers to a pitiful end. As a black swan, Oblivia is a specter beckoning for incorporation from the Dreaming.

In their displacement from the south lands, the swans reflect Indigenous dispossession and dispersal, becoming the novel's central concern and trope; their manifest existence as unwhite otherness allows Wright to project the Dreaming as an actively engaging universe, soliciting mainstream epistemologies of being, and so to play with the mainstream's postcolonial blindness, bent on assimilation and extinction rather than on making room for the Indigenous nations. As *The Swan Book* ironically states,

anybody's politics was a winner these days, so long as they were not blackfellas caring about their culture. So it was nothing for Australians to get excited about when Aboriginal people started being divided into lots and graded on whether anything could be done for them. Upper scale—if they could actually be educated. Lower scale—just needed some *dying pillow* place to die. Many Indigenous populations began to be separated regardless of family or regional ties. In growth centres like the swamp, thousands of Aboriginal people became common freight as they were consigned by the busload, then more conveniently by the truckload. The swamp now renamed Swan Lake was nothing special. It was the same as dozens of fenced and locked Aboriginal detention centres (49).

Putting this in terms of friendship, cosmopolitanism, and hospitality, to repair the social tissue on the continent, the sovereignty of the Indigenous self/host should be respected by the non-Indigenous guest/other. It is (as I indicated earlier) no coincidence that 'host' and 'guest' go back to the same etymological root that signifies 'stranger'; as Derrida says, "as strangers are potential enemies as well as guests, the word has a forked path."<sup>191</sup> This uncanny ambiguity informs the Indigenous/non-Indigenous relationship in contemporary Australia and one can only hope that the discursive gap will one day be closed as the black swan soars in the sky. To dispel any doubts the reader might have regarding her agenda, Wright frames her narrative with the following epitaph recalling William Blake, the Romantic poet and mystic who was heavily influenced by the ideals of liberty, equality, and brotherhood promoted by the American and French Revolutions: "A wild black swan in a cage / Puts all of heaven in a rage" (Robert Adamson, "After William Blake"). The epitaph reads into the nurturing link between human, birds, and environment that has been severed and whose climatological consequences are disastrous.

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<sup>191</sup> "guest", "host", in Douglas Harper, *Online Etymology Dictionary*, 2001–2015, <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php> (accessed 17 October 2015).

It is crucial for the structuring of the novel's politics that black swans only existed as myth in the European imagination and not as actual fact: foregrounding the enigmatic, displaced black swans as Wright does in *The Swan Book* spells out the limitations of the European worldview and beckons toward the existence of an alternative Indigenous universe. Living in the late 1700s, Kant was already aware of the black swan as a living species, so he concludes that "This (merely moral friendship) is not just an ideal but (like black swans) actually exists here and there in its perfection."<sup>192</sup> One may conclude that there is hope for true mainstream enlightenment, a true 'epiphany of the black swan' for doing away with Australia's postcolonial blindness. By being Oblivia's trusted friends as well as mythic and real physical entities, visible and invisible to the mainstream, the black swans and indeed *The Swan Book* itself represent the Dreaming; they are a reminder that the distance that Australia has to cover before it can call itself truly postcolonial is still great.

### **Dreaming and Singing a Songline into Times Immemorial**

Rooted in the Indigenous world of songline and Dreamtime, Wright's lyrical prose works beyond what has often been interpreted as a Magical-Realist vision of the (literary) universe. As I have argued elsewhere, through incommensurability—the impossibility for the Western observer of fully accessing the Indigenous world depicted in her novels—a realist reincorporation of the Dreamtime aspects of her prose into the Western real as mere magic is defied and urges us to reconsider the Indigenous world on its own local, ontological terms, as an all-encompassing Everywhen, as Stanner put it in 1968. It goes against an Enlightenment conception of scientific, rational, verifiable reality and shakes the very foundations of universalist eurocentric reasoning. The lesson for Wright's Western readers is

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<sup>192</sup> Kant, "The Metaphysics of Morals" (1797) 6:472, in Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, tr. & ed. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996): 587, quoted in *The Politics of Friendship*, 258.



nothing less than challenging: we cannot reason away the existence of epistemologies other than our own and so recolonize the other; nor can we deconstruct and deny all ontology of presence in the object of postcolonization; we are made to hold back, listen, and accept that other realities may exist with an epistemological, spiritual, and material presence as valid as our own.<sup>193</sup>

Alison Ravenscroft argues as much in *The Postcolonial Eye* (2012), which analyzes the epistemological blindness framing the white gaze upon the Indigenous Other—and so fixes the Indigenous as the 'inferior', 'uncivilized' receptacle for Western improvement. In cases where such reasoning is exported and used as an epistemological matrix to understand a manifestly different world, this will give rise to serious problems. The colonial project and its persistence as neocolonialism come under pressure and scrutiny as political decolonization (hyphenated) is confused with cultural decolonization (unhyphenated). The question for Western readers is whether we allow our rational, 'objective' interpretation of the world to be questioned, and if so, whether we can take recourse to deconstruction without universalizing it epistemologically as a new, postmodern law, as Aileen Moreton-Robinson points out.<sup>194</sup> A recent study by Baden Offord et al. highlights how the Enlightenment framework inherited from British colonization keeps profoundly informing current Australian thinking in the public sphere. As this study argues,

The historical absence of a substantive recognition of Indigenous ontological belonging [...] has been at the heart of Australia as an Enlightenment project. Moreover, its inherently antagonistic, modernist relationship towards traditions that were perceived as tradition meant that it could not openly recognise the role and significance of traditional communal groups in the colony, except as a stage on the path to civilisation. The future of the colony—to be decided in

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<sup>193</sup> Renes, "Discomforting Readings," 78–81.

<sup>194</sup> Aileen Moreton-Robinson, "'I Still Call Australia Home': Place and Belonging in a White Postcolonising Society," in *Uprootings/Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration*, ed. Sara Ahmed et al. (London: Berg, 2003): 32.

public debate—was a singular and rational one, only covertly shaped by the intricacies of tradition. This was the template of Australia's future.<sup>195</sup>

This claim is not exaggerated. On 4 July 2014, the then PM Tony Abbott declared Australia “unsettled” before European colonization while highlighting foreign investment as the key to the country's very “existence.”<sup>196</sup> Abbott's insistence on the well-trodden path of the neocolonial presence and the impact of capital as the yardstick for the country's success as a society is well in line with what Offord et al. point out.

Capitalist rationalism and economic growth as the defining characteristics of human progress and history as the *written*, academic account of human engagement with a specific place throughout recordable time are, at bottom, forms of cultural denial through the application of an ill-enlightened, eurocentric rhetoric of material presence that claims benign settlement rather than harmful invasion. Tony Abbott must intuitively know that the negative impact of British colonization over the last two centuries, whose dire environmental consequences for Australia's future are addressed in Wright's *The Swan Book*, compares badly with the sustained, successful, nurturing Indigenous management of the Australian continent for a scientifically proven sixty thousand years. This exceptional longevity is what Alexis Wright has described as “times immemorial” from an Indigenous point of view,<sup>197</sup> a stretch of time that emotionally feels like ‘forever’. If any doubts remain about this Indigenous success story, one need only read Bill Gammage's *The Greatest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines Made Australia* (2011), which analyzes how the Indigenous husbandry of the Australian land through fire was at least as effective and sophisticated as, and environmentally sounder than, Western interventions since first contact. Gammage, a non-Indigenous scholar, concludes therefore

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<sup>195</sup> Offord et al., *Inside Australian Culture*, 32.

<sup>196</sup> Paul Daley, “Australia ‘unsettled’ before the British came? Tony Abbott knows better,” in *The Guardian* (4 July 2014), <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jul/04/australia-unsettled-before-the-british-came-tony-abbott-knows-better> (accessed 3 September 2014).

<sup>197</sup> Wright, “A Family Document,” 35.

that decolonization is not a reality yet and still has a long way to go: "We have a continent to learn. If we are to survive, let alone feel at home, we must begin to understand our country. If we succeed, one day we might become Australian."<sup>198</sup>

Alexis Wright's fiction forms part of a larger project to postcolonize the Indigenous and Western mind and world by rewriting the embodied Australian experience of time, space, and place along Indigenous parameters, from within the Indigenous community. As was pointed out by the Indigenous scholar, poet, and writer Jeanine Leane at the 2013 ASAL congress at Sturt University, NSW, Alexis Wright has casually spoken of "Aboriginal Reality" as a generic term for recent Indigenous Australian fiction that fits this deconstructive purpose. The term evidently plays on Magical Realism, which risks assimilating a discrete world of the magical or marvelous to realism, fantasy to reality, the Ideal to the Real, and the Other to the Self from the perspective of Western Reason, while it also reflects Mudrooroo's coinage of Maban Reality. I would argue that the generic denomination 'Aboriginal Reality' would more neutrally posit the Indigenous life experience as the basis for an Australian epistemology, in which the genre of Dreaming narrative flows from a sovereign universe whose spiritual and material effects solicit the legacy of the Enlightenment. It is in the epistemological tension of such a fraught cultural interface<sup>199</sup> that Wright's "distant illusionary homelands" may take physical shape.

With *Plains of Promise*, *Carpentaria*, and *The Swan Book* Wright has successfully engaged in a critical rewriting of the Western novelistic

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<sup>198</sup> Bill Gammage, *The Biggest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines Made Australia* (Sydney & Melbourne: Allen & Unwin, 2011): 323.

<sup>199</sup> See Martin Nakata, *Disciplining the Savages: Savaging the Disciplines* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2007), <http://search.informit.com.au/documentSummary;dn=292985821677957;res=I-ELIND> (accessed 20 March 14). In this study, Nakata builds towards an Indigenous version of Standpoint Theory and constructs the "Cultural Interface" as a complex and flexible space of intercultural relationships in which Indigenous agency and knowledge are acknowledged and inform theorisation; it problematises and deconstructs oppositional terms such as agent/patient, white/black, mainstream/margins to give way to more interactive and participative models of Indigenous lived experience vis-à-vis the larger world in which it is embedded.

genre through the application of the parameters of Aboriginal Reality—that is, the world as experienced through the Dreaming—through fictional content, form, and structure, which explains the difficulty the non-Indigenous reader may find in gaining access to the text. Wright tells—and must tell—her truths in an Indigenous or, better, Waanyi manner; hence Oblivia’s comment that a straight route from the People’s Paradise, her new ‘home’, to the magic/genie shop in the City is not the point, but how one gets from one point to another emotionally.<sup>200</sup> And so it is with narrative. Whereas Wright’s first novel received a mixed welcome, *Carpentaria* scored the highest literary honors in Australia, with reviewers such as Alison Ravenscroft and Craig San Roque highlighting the need to ‘trust’ the author’s prose to gain access to the story.<sup>201</sup> *The Swan Book*’s bid for Aboriginal Reality requires the non-Indigenous reader’s patience, attention, and openness to a manifestly different, defamiliarizing world of (literary) experience in order to reap its multiple rewards.

The Indian cultural studies scholar Ashis Nandy holds that minority “cultures are refusing to sing their *swansongs* and bow out of the world stage to enter the textbooks of history. Indeed, [such] cultures have now begun to return, like Freud’s unconscious, to haunt the modern system of nation states.”<sup>202</sup> In Australia, Indigenous fiction plays an important part in this process and, a major creative impulse, is enjoying increasing recognition. Alexis Wright is a main exponent of this turn of literary events that has developed from Indigenous life writing to telling stories ‘truer than the truth’ through fiction,<sup>203</sup> which led to *The Swan Book*’s being shortlisted for (though not winning) 2014’s Miles Franklin Award. Written with the erudite irony and engagement that characterize her style, Wright’s latest novel is not a swansong of death and resignation

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<sup>200</sup> Wright, *The Swan Book*, 261.

<sup>201</sup> Ravenscroft, “When the Narrator’s Art Matches the Magical Storytelling,” A2, A22; San Roque, “On Reading *Carpentaria*.”

<sup>202</sup> Cited in Offord et al., *Inside Australian Culture*, 113, my emphasis.

<sup>203</sup> Wright, “Politics of Writing,” 13; K. Kunhikrishnan, “Identity Narratives” (review), and “Reclaiming a Heritage” (interview), *The Hindu* (6 April 2003), <http://www.thehindu.com/thehindu/lr/2003/04/06/stories/2003040600180300.htm> (accessed 3 May 2008).

but a critical songline into a possibly empowering future for Australia's Indigenous communities—a native/Indigenous black swan of sorts. The power of imaginative fiction is employed to shed the shackles that trap the Indigenous mind. As the authorial voice announces in the *The Swan Book's* prelude, in order to free herself from the contagion of the settler's way, she has created fiction as a mental Native title in "the quest to regain sovereignty over my own brain,"<sup>204</sup> as well as, one should add, over her Indigenous body and traditional country. Her latest work of nonfiction, a polyphonic tribute to the recently deceased Indigenous Australian activist and visionary Tracker Tilmouth, only strengthens this agenda but cannot be the object of analysis here for reasons of space and time.

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<sup>204</sup> Wright, *The Swan Book*, 4.

## Conclusion

### *Uncanny Manifestation and Canny Manifesto of Country*

They did not want to be central in such a story, which they understood must be about place, and what had grown from it. 'Not us,' they said. 'Not yet. Our children, yes, but not us.'<sup>1</sup>

Country, or nature, far from being an object to be acted upon, is a self-organising system that brings people and other living things into being, into action, into sentience itself.<sup>2</sup>

I develop my novels on ideas of seeing how the land might respond to different stories. The land is [...] one of or even the central character [...] The people who populate the landscape of my writing usually come afterwards—after I have built a place for them.<sup>3</sup>

### The Politics of Genre

In the course of these pages, it has been my aim to show how Indigenous-Australian writing develops on the Australian literary fringe into a genre with a unique voice, content, and agenda. I have also argued that this genre cannot be subsumed under eurocentric literary categories such as the Fantastic, the Gothic, or Magical Realism but should be considered in light of the particularities of the Indigenous storytelling tradition, its environmentalist epistemology, and the political impulse toward Indigenous survival, recovery, and sovereignty within the Australian nation space. This Indigenous

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<sup>1</sup> Kim Scott, *Benang*, 452.

<sup>2</sup> Deborah Rose, "An Indigenous Philosophical Ecology: Situating the Human," *Australian Journal of Anthropology* 16.3 (2005): 303.

<sup>3</sup> Alexis Wright, quoted in Jean-François Vernay, "An Interview with Alexis Wright," *Antipodes* 18.2 (December 2004): 121.

literary development in Australian letters ties in with a firm agenda of Indigenous self-determination and self-definition,<sup>4</sup> which has found its way back into literature by interlocking textual treatment of place, identity, cultural heritage, historical memory, genre, and style. The conflict raised by the adaptation of Indigenous orality to Western written forms (or, rather, its reverse), formulated as the tension between white forms and black content by the black author Mudrooroo in 1985,<sup>5</sup> has found an appropriate answer in the innovations of Indigenous literature over the last two decades.

As I argued in chapter 2, this answer engages with the literary manifestation of the uncanny by interrogating imported European models of self/knowledge, self/definition and corpo/reality from an Indigenous Australian perspective, rooted in the sacredness of country and a concomitant sovereignty of the Indigenous mind and body. As we have seen, Indigenous Australian identity formation is built on a holistic, spiritual–material connection to the land known to Westerners as the Dreamtime or Dreaming: a sacred, law-giving universe of ancestral yet contemporary Indigenous beliefs and customs. It explains, sanctions, and maintains the interconnected and mutually supportive structure and dynamics of traditional country and all its life forms in a continual ritual reenactment of their original creation by totemic ancestors in mythical times. The Dreaming is at once material and transcendental; thus, it is what Stanner called an “Everywhen”<sup>6</sup> and what Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass, and McCredden see as a horizontal, “earthed sacred” or “grounded, located sacred” that inscribes Indigenous Australians as custodians of tribal country in

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<sup>4</sup> See Michael Dodson’s ground-breaking 1994 Wentworth lecture “The end in the beginning: re(de)finding Aboriginality,” reprinted in *Blacklines: Contemporary Critical Writing by Indigenous Australians*, ed. Michele Grossman (1994; Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne UP, 2003): 25–42; Kim Scott and Alexis Wright address these issues in their fiction.

<sup>5</sup> Penny van Toorn, “A Journey Out/Back: Exploring Kim Scott’s True Country,” *Australian-Canadian Studies*: 12.2 (1994): 46. She refers to Mudrooroo/Colin Johnson, “White Forms, Aboriginal Content,” in *Aboriginal Writing Today*, ed. Jack Davis & Bob Hodge (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1983): 21–33.

<sup>6</sup> W.E.H. Stanner, “After the Dreaming,” in *Boyer Lecture Series* (1968; ABC 1991).

non-hierarchical ways, and forms the basis for Indigenous society and its cultural continuity.<sup>7</sup>

In contemporary Australian literature, the solicitation<sup>8</sup> of Aboriginalist structures is performed in a range of texts which I have grouped under the category of Aboriginal Reality. This follows on from Alexis Wright's quip that what is strange and unfamiliar to the mainstream is not so to the Indigenous community but is within the realm of their everyday normality.<sup>9</sup> I have defined Aboriginal Reality as Dreaming narrative with a postcolonial agenda or simply as postcolonizing Dreaming narrative, because it draws on the Indigenous storytelling tradition and adapts it in the contemporary urge for spiritual and material sovereignty. In Aboriginal Reality, narrative recovers orality for literature, with its categories of narrator(s) and narratee(s),<sup>10</sup> and, in light of the etymological relationship between the verbs 'to narrate' and 'to know',<sup>11</sup> the genre transfers epistemological knowledge from one field of experience to another. In Aboriginal Reality, the Dreaming profiles the uncanny role of the Indigenous Secret-Sacred in the transferral of such knowledge. Speaking of Dreaming narrative rather than the more static Dreamtime narrative emphasizes the Indigenous 'Everywhen' as actively engaged with past, present, and future, hence as open to adaptation and change rather than frozen in folkloric myth and

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<sup>7</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Frances Devlin-Glass & Lyn McCredden, *Intimate Horizons* (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2009): 287.

<sup>8</sup> To "solicit" is a Derridean term, used by Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs in *Uncanny Australia*, 21-21; "solicitation" connotes an uncanny process of mutual incitation, attraction, concern, and disturbance. The source text is Jacques Derrida's essay "Différance."

<sup>9</sup> Wright's comment came to me through Jeanine Leane at the 2013 ASAL conference at Charles Sturt University; Leane had heard Wright qualify contemporary Aboriginal fiction in such terms at another conference.

<sup>10</sup> See "narrative," in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (2001, Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004; Answers.com, 2009), <http://www.answers.com/topic/narrative> (accessed 22 July 2009), and in *Online Etymology Dictionary* (Etymonline.com: November, 2001), <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?search=narrative&searchmode=none> (accessed 22 July 2009).

<sup>11</sup> Via Latin: *gnarus* = 'knowing', which relates to *narrare* = tell, recount, explain, relate; lit. 'to make acquainted with'.



culturally stifling primitivism. As Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass, and McCredden note, Dreaming narrative represents a universe of incommensurable complexities which receives its deepest significance from the holistic epistemological bonds with country and enables its potential to engage with the uncanny:

The terminology *dreaming/dreamtime* has a fraught epistemology for both Europeans and Indigenous people. It is a literal translation from a single Aboriginal language (Arrernte), but for many westerners it is misleading, as the sacred knowledge encoded in the narratives has little if anything to do with dreams, and effectively trivialises Indigenous epistemology, though they may be thought to be communicable to an individual in the form of a dream. The problem is that Dreamings/Dreamtime may take the form of narratives, but they are not just narrative, or in any sense meaningful without reference to the land they animate.<sup>12</sup>

Considering Aboriginal Reality as postcolonizing rather than as postcolonial follows Aileen Moreton Robertson's understanding of Australian postcoloniality as unfinished and in process rather than finished for the Indigenous population.<sup>13</sup> The processual nature of Australian postcolonization creates a defamiliarising Indigenous/non-Indigenous interface of cultural exchange based on their respective difference: it is a contact zone of incommensurable worlds duty-bound to get along in the same nation space. Thus, one

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<sup>12</sup> Ashcroft et al., *Intimate Horizons*, 208. They continue to define the complexity of the Dreaming by paraphrasing Deborah Bird Rose's analysis of its ontological interrelatedness with other fields of knowledge in *Nourishing Terrains: Australian Aboriginal View of Landscape and Wilderness* (Commonwealth of Australia, 1996), <http://www.ahc.gov.au/publications/generalpubs/nourishing/index.html> (accessed 2 September 2008).

<sup>13</sup> Aileen Moreton-Robinson, "I Still Call Australia Home': Place and Belonging in a White Postcolonising Society," 30, 37. An example of such a false perception would be ex PM Tony Abbott's recent claim that living in remote Aboriginal communities is a life-style choice rather than the result of neo-colonial inequalities (Shalaila Medhore for *The Guardian Online*, 10 May 2015 <http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2015/mar/10/remote-communities-are-lifestyle-choices-says-tony-abbott> (accessed 21 February 2016)).

can consider 'postcolonizing' transitively (so that dreaming narrative is postcolonizing Australia) or intransitively (it is dreaming narrative itself that is becoming postcolonial).

In such a dynamic view of 'strange cultural survival', Aboriginal Reality acquires a literal as well as a literary meaning. The first draws attention to Indigenous literary output as the disquieting manifestation of a process of rewriting Australianness to the mainstream; through literature, Indigenous Australian identities are renegotiated across Australia's cultural and physical space, affecting mainstream self-definitions in return and spilling over into the terrain of class and gender. The second meaning highlights the textual dis-covery of the Indigenous Secret-Sacred in Australian letters through its generic adaptation of non-Indigenous to Indigenous form and content; by rewriting genre, it configures an unsettling First-Nations<sup>14</sup> inscription of literature in its epistemological link with Australian country.<sup>15</sup>

This double bind across the literal and the literary brings us back to the Indigenous corpus in its broadest sense. The instances of what I have analyzed as Aboriginal Reality constitute a body (Lat. *corpus*) of Indigenous writing that performs the reinscription and reanimation of Indigenous bodies (Lat. *corpora*) into the Australian landscape and textscape after two centuries of colonialist erasure policies and as such fleshes out an Indigenous body politic in search of its sovereignty. As I have argued, the processual, changing nature of this reinscription is inherent to a politics of the Indigenous body which employs identity flexibly and denies its immanent belonging to either a nostalgic, static culture frozen in the past, or to what is the same, a lost biological essence. Deconstructing essentialist notions of

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<sup>14</sup> The original inhabitants of settler nations are often referred to as First Nations, so that Aboriginal Reality turns white Australian nationalism on its head. Note that in Western countries, literary studies developed as a school and university subject on the wave of nineteenth-century nationalism.

<sup>15</sup> I prefer to use 'country' over 'land' in this context, as the latter is connected to a white, hierarchical concept of the management of local resources; the former, however, is an Indigenous notion with all the lateral epistemological connections of habitat and interconnectedness that this implies.

race as well as gender and class, it activates “temporary closures”<sup>16</sup> of Indigenous identity strategically while insisting on internal differentiation. In order to find access to those political, legal, financial, economic, and cultural resources that allow a reconversion of *terra nullius* into *terra aboriginum*, Indigeneity is asserted but without “fall[ing] into the trap of allowing Aboriginality to be another fixed category.”<sup>17</sup> The twofold inscription of the Indigenous Australian corpus as oeuvre and corpo-reality allows us to trace these changes in recent Indigenous Australian writing, as well as to understand its generic and thematic interconnections.

### **From Life writing to Aboriginal Reality**

In the 1980s, the auto/biography became a popular means of self-expression among rural and urban Indigenous women authors, often from the mixed-descent perspective of the Stolen Generations. Salient examples are Sally Morgan’s *My Place* (1987), Glenyse Ward’s *Wandering Girl* (1987), Ruby Langford’s *Don’t Take Your Love to Town* (1988), and Doris Pilkington Garimara’s *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* (1996). Life writing’s presumed faithful reflection of actual lived experience was employed to denounce Indigenous genocide, dispossession, removal, and practical slavery, but also allowed mainstream scrutiny and questioning of the Indigenous text and its author on ‘objective–scientific’ grounds. The latter tied in with the authenticity debate on the nature of Indigenous lived experience and the discovery of literary hoaxes involving non-Indigenous authors who fraudulently used Indigenous identities to further private interests.<sup>18</sup> Hence, the inherent realist transparency of life

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<sup>16</sup> Lisa Slater, “Kim Scott’s Benang: Monstrous (Textual) Bodies,” *Southerly* 65.1 (2005): 70.

<sup>17</sup> Dodson, “The end in the beginning,” 39. Full quotation in Chapter 1 above.

<sup>18</sup> The Wanda Koolmatrie case is one of the most notorious. In 1994, the Aboriginal publishing house Magabala Books published the novel *My Own Sweet Time*, written by Wanda Koolmatrie. It was presumably the autobiographical account of a member of the Stolen Generations, an Aboriginal woman, born in 1949 to the Pitjantjatjara people, who had been raised by white foster parents after being taken from her mother in 1950. The novel was successful and gained a literary

writing incremented its vulnerability to denialist attitudes and policies of assimilative thrust in the essentially unaltered context of white dominion of Australia's political, economic, and cultural resources. Generally, the genre has conditioned Indigenous literary expression, and Indigenous authors have written themselves into and out of life writing in a variety of ways, so that, in parallel with life writing, fictional accounts of individual and communal Indigenous experience have developed to thwart mainstream resistance to racial/ethnic remappings of Australian cultural territory.

### Sally Morgan and Genre

As we saw in Chapter 2, Sally Morgan's *My Place* played a salient role in bringing to light the hidden tensions in Indigenous life writing, as it placed itself on the white edges of the genre and therefore easily engaged mainstream readership.<sup>19</sup> While her instance of life writing was emblematic in bringing the plight of the Stolen Generations to the nation's attention, its purported 'meek' reconciliatory content generated an opportunity for white identification with its westernized, hybrid protagonist, and thus an easy reckoning with the damaging history of Indigenous-child-removal policy for mainstream readership. Thus, the Indigenous community questioned the text's liberating impetus regarding the politics of sexual blame and guilt which had fixed Indigenous women and their hybrid offspring in victim roles.

Morgan's textual inscription of her Indigenous heritage through merely genetic connections proved somewhat miraculous and, hence, 'inauthentic' to a range of critical Indigenous and mainstream commentators, and the equation of inauthenticity with hybridity

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award, but the author was later found out to be a white Australian taxi driver with literary aspirations named Leon Carmen. Carmen claimed that using a false identity was his best bet to break into the literary world—see Penny van Toorn "Indigenous texts and narratives," in *The Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature*, ed. Elizabeth Webby (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000): 42–44.

<sup>19</sup> In this context, the Indigenous academic Jackie Huggins wonders why *My Place* has become such a "holy" text about Aboriginality among mainstream Australians—see Huggins, "Always was always will be," 62.

regarding Morgan's person extended to the public assessment of her book. Critics doubted whether Morgan's retrieval of Indigeneity could be considered genuine, instrumental, and emancipatory; Indigenous scholars would no doubt agree with Jackie Huggins and Marcia Langton that Indigenous identity formation is an arduous process of (re)socialization beyond genetics.<sup>20</sup> Thus, Morgan's Indigeneity can only be convincingly expressed through her commitment to the Indigenous community and agenda in the years *after* writing *My Place*—although the writing of *My Place* has a performative quality that the object of the published book belies but which should be taken into account. As I argued in chapter 2, this lived experience has effectively been added to her self-definition but perhaps not sufficiently considered up to now. Significantly, as if to avoid further polemics, Morgan presents herself more as a painter than as a writer and, keeping a low public profile, is reluctant to grant interviews.

*My Place* could be more productively reassessed as a necessary step on the way to a storytelling mode that gives primacy to Indigenous over Western form and content while effectively speaking out to both audiences. By looking at its hybrid traits bridging the Western written and the Indigenous oral tradition, *My Place* displays its ambiguous interfacial character, a fringe phenomenon in the realm of auto/biography by the way it defies a single narrator's perspective and blurs the neat borders between genres. As an exploration of a deeply buried identity, the novel configures itself not only as an autobiography but also as a psychological study, quest narrative, and detective mystery. Yet, it also contains elements of the epic and historical novel in the way it traces the trials and tribulations of Morgan's kin over three generations, displaying a hitherto silenced history of Indigenous community. In doing so, the text engages with Dreaming Narrative in interplay with Magical Realism, Fantasy, and the Gothic.

This blurring of genres is on a par with a calculated use of polyphony, in which Morgan's voice gives way to those of her peers as she slowly moves in on the core of her family's secret identity.

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<sup>20</sup> Huggins, "Always was always will be," 62; Marcia Langton, "Well, I heard it on the radio and I saw it on the television...", 29–30.

Thus, the textual body is steadily unwhitened as the stories unfold, and Morgan's gullibility put to work as a fictional narrative device in the dis-covering of a dark mystery. The use of polyphony coheres with the Indigenous storytelling tradition, in that stories are kept in custody rather than owned, so that their telling should take place with due respect for Indigenous narrative protocol. Thus, *My Place* reveals itself as a contrived document that draws on both the Indigenous and the non-Indigenous tradition to recover a sense of Indigeneity in a world that had long denied such a possibility. Morgan cleverly crafts a textual body as hybrid as her own, which belies the apparent mainstream ease with which the text and her identity have been read; and this accords with Aileen Moreton-Robinson's notion of Indigenous people being able to *perform* both Indigenous and mainstream identity successfully.<sup>21</sup> Drawing on an unsettling finale inscribed in the female Gothic, the novel offers no closure, as Sally's Indigenous grandmother's last devastating secret—the possibility of her having mothered a long string of incestuous hybrid offspring—is never revealed. This non-revelation to uninitiated readers respects the principle of custodianship and the secrecy of the Indigenous sacred, acts as a sensible measure of self-protection, and beckons toward the text's inscription as a form of Aboriginal Reality.

### Mudrooroo and Genre

As discussed in chapter 3, Mudrooroo's case is a foil to Sally Morgan's. Mudrooroo employs auto/biography in his Tasmanian quintet from a fictional perspective, but this is not enough to ward off the effects of a *strategic* employment of a politics of the Indigenous Australian body that demands both genetic inscription and Indigenous life experience. Having spent his younger years in conditions that identified him as a member of the Stolen Generations, the apparent lack of an Indigenous bloodline in, and the suspicion of, a self-interested lie about his descent led to his person and corporeality being seriously questioned. This has undoubtedly shaped the

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<sup>21</sup> Moreton-Robinson, "I Still Call Australia Home," 32.

agenda of the last three volumes of his Tasmanian quintet, which in its totality of five novels spans almost twenty years of literary activity. Mudrooroo fictionalizes and rewrites the biographies of three historical figures in the white conquest of Tasmania, the commissioner-protector George Augustus Robinson and the Tasmanian Aborigines Trugernanna and her husband Wooreddy. On a par with the achievements of the New Australian History, Mudrooroo's initial aim is to rewrite the official mainstream account of Tasmania's benign settlement and to remap the island with its Indigenous by reinterpreting these three characters and embedding their adventures in an alternative Indigenous history. From *Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription* (1983) to *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* (1990), the series develops in this postcolonizing direction, reversing Gothic narrative and incorporating Dreaming narrative to suit an agenda of Indigenous empowerment. However, born of the controversy over his identity, the subsequent Vampire trilogy lends the author's prose a thick Gothic coloration and forecasts the destruction of all identity, pasting the disabling Gothic doom of vampiric nonsignification over the vigor of the Dreaming.

In the final analysis, Indigenous characterization in the quintet and Mudrooroo's problematic (non-)identity circulate through each other in uncanny ways, reflecting the author's desperate attempt to carve out an Australian space for himself through fiction. Whereas Sally Morgan manages to take a tentative step toward an Indigenous identity through her auto/biography, Mudrooroo ends up writing himself out of Indigeneity. The penultimate volume, *Underground* (1999), parodies life writing through the 'autobiographical' account of the half-caste vampire George, but Mudrooroo's self-identification ultimately does not lie with this lonely, lost character. It should be sought, rather, in the Aboriginalized African Wadawaka, whose increasing importance in the quintet matches and compensates for Mudrooroo's public downfall by creating a fictional Australian niche for the author. Eventually, Mudrooroo's identitarian mirror location—of a haunting Derridean spectrality incapable of incorporation into an Indigenous ontology of presence—also merges with the disturbing space of nonsignification occupied by the white vampiress who invades George's life story with her own autobiographical account. Amelia is not only Bram Stoker's dark, Antipodean *fin-de-siècle* offspring but also a disturbing rewriting of

Elizabeth Fraser, whose Indigenous misadventures after shipwreck on the Queensland coast in the early nineteenth century have made her the epitome of colonial history's unreliability. Acting and moving beyond race, gender, and class distinctions and considerations, and spawning vampiric offspring through her voracious contagious bite, Amelia Fraser represents a desperate, anti-natural grab for identity-cum-wish-fulfillment for the author, underscored by the coupling of Amelia and Wadawaka on the last pages of the series' final volume, *The Promised Land* (2000). Almost forced upon them by colonial circumstances, their mating represents a grim new beginning for Australia which sadly subsumes the Aborigine—an alternative 'new times' or promised land to which the author, whose personal involvement and interest in his fiction is hard to deny, may subscribe.

Mudrooroo's particular employment of life writing necessarily moves in the terrain of fiction, as it cannot retrieve a biological Indigenous identity for the author. Grounded in a highly wrought theoretical basis—a politico-literary agenda coined Maban Reality in emulation of Magical Realism—his alienating carnivalesque of earlier modes of fictional narrative promotes some features that would inscribe it in Aboriginal Reality. There is a generic blurring of oral history, auto/biography, epic, quest narrative, adventure tale, and classical myth that goes hand in hand with an overarching tension between the Gothic and Dreaming narrative. In its effort to undo colonial binaries in a reappraisal of Indigeneity and in the way this disquieting interrogation of race spills into the terrain of gender and class, Mudrooroo's Tasmanian quintet should be understood to be postcolonizing. But while *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* is decidedly ground-breaking in its treatment of Indigeneity, Mudrooroo's Vampire trilogy suggests the complete destruction of identity rather than its strategic employment in the service of the Indigenous community's political empowerment. If Mudrooroo's Vampire trilogy occupies a generic space of its own, could it be termed a (decapitalized) 'black-Australian dreaming narrative' or 'black-Australian Reality'? The impossibility of categorization chimes with Annalisa Oboe's appreciative observation that Mudrooroo's fiction is



“so productively impure,”<sup>22</sup> which goes to show that such critical deconstruction has its own merits, albeit not for Indigenous interests.

### Kim Scott and Genre

Kim Scott is, like Sally Morgan, a whitened, urbanized third-generation survivor of the Stolen Generations, and as such an uncanny instance of the Indigene. As argued in chapter 4, Scott chooses to approach Indigenous identity formation by focussing the Indigenous experience through a fictional lens, no doubt influenced by the critical reception of the first wave of life writing. Yet, this does not prevent him from firmly anchoring himself in ancestral country and community, after a long and tedious process of tracing his Indigenous roots. Convinced that fiction can represent truth better than nonfiction,<sup>23</sup> Scott in his novels experiments with Aboriginal Reality by adapting style, genre, socio-political history, and personal biography to give Indigenous substance to his westernized identity.

In *True Country* (1993), Billy Storey’s quest for an Indigenous self in the Western Australian outback renders Scott’s own teaching experience in the Kimberley, which formed part of a fruitless search for his Indigenous roots. *True Country* acts, in this sense, as personal wish-fulfillment, since Billy’s Indigenous heritage is firmly established at the end of the novel. As Billy is a fictional character, the success of his search cannot enable inquiry into the state of Scott’s Indigeneity, thus circumventing the problem of authenticity. *True Country* can be seen to rehearse the elements that give *Benang* its distinctive qualities: polyphony over single narrative perspective, Dreaming over Christian belief and myth, inscription in community and country, local Indigenous stories over white history, custodianship of culture and country over ownership, and the personal involvement and commitment of the author.

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<sup>22</sup> Annalisa Oboe, “Introduction” to *Mongrel Signatures: Reflections on the Work of Mudrooroo*, ed. Annalisa Oboe (Cross/Cultures 64; Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2003): xvii. This volume of essays is a reappraisal of his writing with international contributions.

<sup>23</sup> K. Kunhikrishnan, “Identity Narratives.”

*Benang* (1999) is a much more ambitious literary project which reflects Scott's extensive research into his family records and the official files pertaining to the period of eugenicist policies in Western Australia. Scott's aim is to deactivate eugenicist language so as to free the Stolen Generations from stigma and employ their heritage in the service of Indigenous survival and recovery, which explains why *Benang's* publication comes in the aftermath of the *Bringing-Them-Home* report (1997). In this novel, the fictional protagonist successfully manages to retrieve an Indigenous identity in the face of the devastating impact of the eugenicist project to 'breed the Native out' through the Stolen Generations. On a textual level, this is evidenced through the use of non-linear, rhizomatic narrative and polyphony, which allows the author to recompose a sense of the individual and community out of the collapse of history and narrative point of view. On the human level, this is given shape in Harley's transformation into an Indigenous 'clever man' or shaman, who from the disturbing 'whiteness' of his hybrid identity 'sings' country and its people back into place—that is to say, by emulating the sounds and features of the land, sea, and flora and fauna, wholesome nurturing bonds between country and humans are re-established. For its uncanny employment of the Dreaming and empowering recovery of the sign Indigenous, Scott's fiction moves far beyond autobiographical life writing into the realm of Aboriginal Reality.

His Indigenous identity firmly though flexibly established, Scott leaves the strictly personal behind and takes an empowering communal perspective in *That Deadman Dance* (2010), which aligns it with Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria's* agenda. This allows him to rewrite first-contact history in his coastal homeland of southern Western Australia from a Nyoongar perspective, which may strike the mainstream reader as uncanny in its reversal of 'civilized' values in favor of exploring the area's Nyoongar population. It embodies Indigenous incommensurability as sovereignty chiefly through its male Nyoongar protagonist, a *djanak*/shaman, trickster, and cultural mediator who playfully tries to guide his people and white settlers on a shared songline through first-contact territory by using the magic powers of song and dance. The finale, on a somber note, introduces the demise of the Indigenous universe and speaks back to the imposition of neocolonial assimilation in the Northern Territory as of the Howard administration's Emergency Response of 2007. The

novel marks out a prelapsarian Dreamtime narrative corrupted by the advent of the ghostly Europeans, revealing the sense of betrayal of Indigenous hospitality underpinning the colonial enterprise as a lingering stain on white Australia's track record of human rights. It is in the contrast of the plausibility of this reimagined past and sovereignty with contemporary neoliberal, assimilative policies toward the Indigenous population that Scott's re-Dreaming of history acquires its postcolonizing potential.

### Alexis Wright and Genre

As discussed in chapter 5, Alexis Wright's reflection on the plight of the Stolen Generations is given shape through her first novel, *Plains of Promise* (1997). It is the product of the conservative backlash on Native Title and Indigenous rights in the mid- and late 1990s but also coincides with the *Bringing-Them-Home* report. With the fictional context of *Plains of Promise*, Wright responds to traditional forms of life writing which place the text and its author under scrutiny, and does not address her own Indigeneity directly. Her choice of the fictional mode echoes Scott's, in that she "use[s] literature to try and create a truer replica of reality [...] not the actual truth, but a good portrayal of the truth which [she] see[s], and that is the living hell of the lives of many Aboriginal people."<sup>24</sup>

*Plains of Promise* operates as fictional life writing in staging an urbanized second-generation member of the Stolen Generations in search of her Indigenous identity; however, it also contains the elements of an Indigenous family saga, quest narrative, Christian myth, murder mystery-cum-detective story, the Gothic, the oral tradition, and Dreaming narrative. The novel powerfully engages with the uncanny, and deliberately making it difficult for mainstream readers to easily access knowledge, gain understanding, and find solutions to the problematic issues of Indigenous identity formation and survival that are addressed, its ambiguous finale defying closure. The uncanny obtains not only for non-Indigenous readers but also for the text's hybrid protagonists, which heightens the sense of

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<sup>24</sup> Wright, "Politics of Writing," 13.

alienation caused by the presence of the unfathomable, incommensurable world of the Dreaming. Indigenous empowerment is ambiguously inscribed in this text, which reflects Wright's critical attitude to, and disappointment with, Indigenous and non-Indigenous politics regarding the Indigenous body at that particular stage of Australian history; but inasmuch as Western understandings of literature and identity/Indigeneity are challenged, *Plains of Promise* reveals itself as Aboriginal Reality.

In *Carpentaria* (2006), Alexis Wright's defiance of Western form and content achieves full force as Aboriginal Reality. Scripting the narrative as a story of country, Wright leaves the vicissitudes of the Stolen Generations behind to concentrate on an Indigenous origin story anchored in community. Wright's depiction of Indigenous traces on an ostensibly whitened landscape and of its recovery as inalienable country for the Indigenous community through engagement with the Dreaming is ground-breaking in its potential for Indigenous empowerment and agency. Rather than personal life writing, which after all is a westernized genre concerned with individual development and progress, Wright's story functions on the level of community and its indelible, nurturing links with ancestral country. Using a holistic approach that collapses different realms of knowledge into a non-hierarchical whole, Wright's composition develops an epic songline into new literary territory for Indigenous writing.

With *The Swan Book* (2013), Wright's fiction comes full circle, with the novel merging the plotlines of her previous two novels. The scope is broadened to encompass the Australian continent in its entirety, and Indigenous and mainstream society is observed from a dystopian vantage point a hundred years from now. This is unlike the pessimistic *Plains of Promise*, which is, rather, locked into a past of despair, or the more optimistic *Carpentaria*, which is concerned with an empowering present for Indigeneity. *The Swan Book's* scope is as epic as that of *Carpentaria* but draws more on *Plains of Promise* in terms of plot, thus uniting the micro and macro levels, the local with the continental, and the grassroots with the federal in an Australian Dreaming.

*The Swan Book* is an instance of Aboriginal Reality in the way it creates a narrative without final closure, with a Dreamtime setting that builds on the cyclical character of storying, the endless way in

which Dreaming narrative reenacts and rewrites itself in its performance of Indigeneity. By recasting plot, themes, and characters from her previous novels, Wright constantly invokes and articulates what she has termed the multifaceted helix of her fiction. The Dreamtime is first and foremost present in Oblivia's relationship with the black swans, both displaced from country and spectral revenants from an Indigenous Australian universe that resists assimilation. The Derridean concept of 'hostipitality' is at work in the way the text both welcomes and rejects its readers. They must be willing to discard common expectations and prejudices in order to access the novel. The book rewards effort only if readers put their trust in the author, whose fiction claims a discursive space we may describe as intellectually sovereign.

### From Land to Country

As instances of postcolonizing literature written from an Indigenous point of view—with the complex case of Mudrooroo's entitlement to such a standpoint as a vexed marginal case—the works dealt with in this study engage not only with race but also with gender and class. They blur these binary categories through the activation of the uncanny, triggered by an Indigenous inscription in country as the unifying, leveling principle. Ruby Langford Ginibi put her finger on the incommensurable epistemological difference in the conceptualization of the earth as 'land' or 'country' when she wrote: "I thought of the difference between white people saying '*I own* this land' and blacks saying '*We belong* to this land'."<sup>25</sup> Land and country belong to two manifestly different worlds of experience; one—Western—is hierarchical and the other—Indigenous—is not. The former is expressed as individual land use through private ownership and capitalist production tying in with a colonial/racial, patriarchal, and classist stratification of society. The latter inscribes human presence collectively in the custodianship of a larger, sentient ecosystem/habitat which organizes and sustains its parts non-

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<sup>25</sup> Ruby Langford Ginibi, *Don't Take Your Love to Town* (Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin, 1988): 262 (emphasis added).

hierarchically in terms of mutual support and respect rather than individual profit and use; hence, the reinscription of 'country' interrogates and levels the binary categories associated with 'land'.

With the exception of Mudrooroo's later work, the novels discussed engage with the recovery of the Indigenous heritage by prioritizing an Indigenous palimpsest over a non-Indigenous tabula rasa conception of (hi)story, reinscribing *terra nullius* as *terra ab/originum* and reinstating land as country. Thus, they dis-cover the very existence of white culture on Australian soil as part of a complex, multiple layering: an imposition unable to erase the inscription of an older, preexisting culture never relinquished or forgotten. They also re-present the white account of benign settlement as harmful invasion as they recover the voices and traces of Indigeneity in the pages of Australia's mainstream history. In the case of the Stolen Generations, this process blurs the distinctions applied in the nature–nurture debate because the discovery of an Indigenous heritage—as in *My Place*, *True Country*, *Benang*, and *Plains of Promise*—is coinscribed as its recovery. Tabula rasa narrative implies the wholesale imposition of cultural acquisition leading to the destruction of previous identity (nurture over nature); palimpsest narrative presupposes cultural erasure's imperfect character (nature over nurture). The implication is that, in the case of the Stolen Generations, nurture serves to recuperate a preexisting Indigenous identity. The rediscovery of Indigenous identity as both nature and nurture, essence as well as performance, is therefore unsettling and ambiguous; it reflects the current application of a strategic politics of the Indigenous body that employs a biological interpretation of the concept of descent as well as a dynamic social definition in terms of self-definition and community acceptance.

### **Sally Morgan and the Sense of Place**

Sally Morgan's reconstruction of her Indigeneity is conducted mainly along matrilineal lines by the dis-covery of a harmful secret guarded by her maternal grandmother. This provides the novel with its gendered inscription, as it is a story by, about, and for women. Morgan's text shows that the plight of the Stolen Generations is traumatically and emphatically configured around the severed

relationship between mothers and their hybrid offspring, which haunts the identity of the latter with Gothic intensity. Notably, Morgan refuses the Freudian, oedipal inscription of her generational narrative, in which her own white father and her maternal white grandfather both figure as social failures. The former an emotionally-crippled, physically-abusive alcoholic and the latter an incestuous pervert, both failures are inscribed in notions of race, gender, and class; Bill Milroy is poor working-class and impaired by war and (homo)sexual trauma, Howden Drake-Brockman an empowered member of one of Western Australia's wealthiest pastoral families who abuses part-Indigenous girls as sexual and domestic slaves. Attempts on the part of the Drake-Brockmans to challenge Sally's account with DNA tests have been wisely refused by the author's family, who see no future in pursuing consanguinity in times when Indigeneity has been moving in a more culturally inscribed direction.

Taking Sneja Gunew's words into the literary field, Morgan's novel steers clear of "paternal confusion" and celebrates "maternal promiscuity."<sup>26</sup> In recovering her Indigenous family line, she reverses the traditional conviction that sexual abuse implies shame and guilt for the female victim rather than the victimizer, and defies the biblical account that woman is to blame for the sin of man. As Wenche Ommundsen writes,

*real* Australian readers of [*My Place*] are invited to search for their identities elsewhere: outside masterplots of European civilization, outside the sins of their white Australian fathers, outside, finally, the narrative structures which locate identity within the sexual vagaries of family history.<sup>27</sup>

Morgan makes a tentative start with such a reconfiguration of identity by locating her Indigenous ancestors' homeland in the Pilbara, claiming that if this reconnection with a story of country and

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<sup>26</sup> Sneja Gunew, "Denaturalizing cultural nationalisms: multicultural readings of Australia," in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990): 100. See also Chapter 1.

<sup>27</sup> Wenche Ommundsen, "Engendering the Bicentennial Reader: Sally Morgan, Mark Henshaw and the Critics," *SPAN: Journal of the South Pacific Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies* 36 (Oct 1993): 262-263.

kin rather than with oedipal narrative had not happened, “we would have survived, but not as whole people. We would have never known our place.”<sup>28</sup> The connection to land in this vision is inscribed in holistic belonging and communal custodianship rather than individual ownership of culture and its material support system.

### Mudrooroo and the Sense of Place

Mudrooroo’s Tasmanian quintet initially locates the potential for Indigenous resistance, survival, and change in the male principle. It results in the writing up of the character and role of Wooreddy and the writing down of the ‘treacherous’ Robertson as well as a meek Trugernanna; Mudrooroo has consequently been criticized for giving his agenda of Indigenous emancipation a masculinist shape. While the author attempts to strike more of a balance between Wooreddy and Trugernanna in his *Master of the Ghost Dreaming*, the suspicion of misogyny returns in the quintet’s development toward a vampiric finale in which the locus of Gothic horror is female, developing out of the Holy/Bloody Mary-like character of Mada/Mother scripted in *Master*. The latter novel forms the watershed between a more manageable inscription of decolonization—replicated in Jangamuttuk’s control of the gullible white pseudo-biblical trinity Fada–Mada–Sonny—and the uncontrollable Gothic violence and gore that follows. This return to the Gothic in the Vampire trilogy coincides with, and is informed by, the full impact of the Mudrooroo Affair and conservative federal tenure.

Observers generally agree that Mudrooroo’s aloof male-chauvinist hardliner attitude, emblematically staged in his disparaging treatment of Sally Morgan’s *My Place*, has not helped to lend him support in his racial/ethnic predicament. Feminist Australian scholars have long been at odds with him, highlighting as they do the disturbing links between the personal and the fictional in his oeuvre. Thus, Maureen Clark establishes an unsettling link between the apparent failure of the maternal connection to the author’s presumed Nyoongar kin and his use of a female vampire as the abject, immoral

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<sup>28</sup> Sally Morgan, *My Place*, 231–233 (emphasis added).



space of race, gender, and class terror.<sup>29</sup> More disturbingly still, if we understand the fictional space of the Vampire trilogy as reflecting the impact of the Mudrooroo Affair on the author's personal life, his hybrid identity may be seen to shift from George to Wadawaka and ultimately to conflate with Amelia. Desperately inscribing himself in the female but engulfed by the white female abject, the author announces a terrifying dissolution of race and gender identity which nonetheless represents a 'solution' for his protean elusiveness.

Of additional importance in the development of the quintet are the characters of George Augustus Robinson and Amelia Fraser, whose lower-class background should not be underestimated in their respective colonial ambitions. Robinson is a colonial parvenu whose cottage welfare industry on Indigenous backs is the source of his fortune, while Amelia's predatory sexuality has its roots in male domestic violence caused by extreme poverty in the mother country. Especially Amelia's indistinct preying on fellow characters in the series blurs the category of class as well as those of gender and race, and this plants the seed of change in vampiric matrilineal proliferation. If, indeed, Mudrooroo inhabits the fictional space created for his postcolonizing vampire, we can see him as haunting Australia's identity debate from a nonlocation which sucks all meaning into nonsignification, rewriting country ambiguously as a 'black w/hole'.

Moving on from the sad loss of the Indigenous homeland in *Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription*, the series peaks in the promise of identity's communal inscription in country in *Master of the Ghost Dreaming*, full of empowering Dreaming characters and events. However, this promise is forsaken in the Vampire trilogy, in which Indigeneity is fighting a losing battle against white invasion. The mob's quest for a new Australian homeland along a hybrid songline proves unsuccessful; many die, the community dissolves, and the few survivors are taken to Britain as colonial trophies and objects of curiosity. The lonely half-caste vampire George, the infected hybrid seed of Indigenous survival remaining on the island continent, is incorporated as a mere pet into Amelia and Wadawaka's 'nuclear family'. While offering a 'strange cultural survival' for his own

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<sup>29</sup> Maureen Clark, "Terror as White Female in Mudrooroo's Vampire Trilogy," 122.

identity, Mudrooroo shows no hope, understanding, or mercy for the people that have largely disowned him, and writes them out of Australian territory as victims of colonization and its racist discourse, in nihilistic retaliation. The concluding image of Australia we receive in *The Promised Land* is that of a “dismal colony.”<sup>30</sup>

### Kim Scott and the Sense of Place

Kim Scott’s recovery of his Indigenous heritage ostensibly develops along patrilineal lines in his first two novels but this is out of respect for the protection and custodianship of sensitive material rather than male chauvinism, as he feels he is not empowered to deal with a world of experience not his own—but which he does take on in his latest novel, *Taboo*.<sup>31</sup> Like Scott himself, Billy Storey starts his search for Indigeneity by running up against his status as a westernized urban middle-class professional. Nevertheless, *True Country* eventually locates Billy’s Indigenous heritage through Walanguh, his grand-uncle by his father’s mother, who was removed from the mission. On the other hand, *Benang* is at pains to unwrite the patriarchal narrative that has done Harley and his father so much harm as the result of his white grandfather’s eugenicist project. Harley may only achieve some form of Indigenous inscription by tracing his Indigenous ancestry to an original mother figure beyond the white paternal line; it is his great-great-grandmother Fanny Benang (“Tomorrow”) who gives the title to the novel, denoting hope for the future. Yet again, the matter of white ‘paternal confusion’ created by hidden hybrid offspring is solved by coming to terms with Indigenous ‘maternal promiscuity’, since the official eugenicist qualification of “notorious prostitute” for Fanny is rewritten.<sup>32</sup> It is by placing the blame and guilt for the practice of ‘black velvet’ on white patriarchy itself that solutions for the Stolen Generations and their

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<sup>30</sup> Mudrooroo, *The Promised Land*, 231.

<sup>31</sup> Joseph Buck, “Trees that Belong Here: An Interview with Award-Winning Australian Author, Kim Scott,” *Boomtown Magazine* 1.3 (2001), [www.boomtownmag.com/articles/200101/benang.htm](http://www.boomtownmag.com/articles/200101/benang.htm) (accessed 16 February 2005).

<sup>32</sup> Scott, *Benang*, 106.

offspring must be sought, as *Benang*—along with *My Place*—so eloquently spells out.

Scott's inscription in the maternal ties in with a wider, leveling inscription of Indigenous identity in country. In agreement with some of the Indigenous women's voices heard in *Benang*, Scott manifestly sees his fiction as stories "about place, and what ha[s] grown from it."<sup>33</sup> Thus, *True Country* is not an individualized account of, but a dialogic communal effort at, establishing Indigeneity, supported by stylistic devices such as polyphony and Indigenous forms of English. Scott wanted the novel "in the form of its telling [to] suggest[-] something of being claimed by a heritage."<sup>34</sup> Thus, Philip Morrissey says:

The fact that the text follows Billy but does not describe the community of Karnama and surrounding land solely from his point of view enables Scott to show the importance of land independently of any given subjectivity.<sup>35</sup>

*Benang* expands on these features by breaking with progressive, linear story development as well; the process of establishing an Indigenous identity configures a complex puzzle in which many human pieces are involved synchronically and diachronically, all leading back to country as the nurturing source of all life forms. Spatially, this is configured by priming horizontal over vertical movement in the text: while verticals generally relate to patriarchal family trees—Ern's "sharply ruled diagrams"<sup>36</sup>—horizontal denote promiscuous, maternal, rhizomatic proliferation.<sup>37</sup> On the final count, *Benang* suggests that people do not own the land but that it owns them, making them its guardians for the common good rather than

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<sup>33</sup> Scott, *Benang*, 452.

<sup>34</sup> Kim Scott, "Strangers at home," in *Translating Lives: Living with Two Languages and Cultures*, ed. Mary Besemeres & Anna Wierzbicka (St Lucia: U of Queensland P, 2007): 3.

<sup>35</sup> Philip Morrissey, "Aboriginal Writing," in *The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture*, ed. Sylvia Kleinert & Margo Neale (Melbourne: Oxford UP, 2000): 319.

<sup>36</sup> Scott, *Benang*, 29.

<sup>37</sup> See Chapter 4.

usurpers for selfish gain. In becoming an powerful *djanak*, able to move within and above the landscape, Harley assumes custodianship of country and performs postcolonizing ceremonies that sing the land and its life forms out of neo/colonial dislocation back into place, with all the blurring of imported race, gender, and class hierarchies this entails. Significantly, the hybridity of his empowered new identity is underlined by his capacity to move simultaneously on the horizontal and vertical planes, occupying three-dimensional space at will.

In *That Deadman Dance*, Scott engages fully with the inscription of community in country and is less concerned with gender and class than with race, though the perspective is predominantly Indigenous and male, no doubt leaving it up to Indigenous women to tell their own story, as previously with *Benang*. Leaving any ties with his direct family history behind—though using some of his forebears' names<sup>38</sup>—the author could still be seen reflected in the novel's main character, Bobby Wabalanginy. He, like Scott, reaches out to settler Australia with an inclusionary definition of Indigenized Australianness, and uses his particular dancing and singing skills to work the magic of crosscultural understanding, tracing a new songline for Indigenous and settler Australians alike. Bobby's efforts eventually come to nothing in the face of the thrust of white invasion in the territory; the loss of an edenically inscribed Antipodean landscape as Indigenous country, but also as host to the European settlers, sounds a warning about the ongoing oppression of Indigenous communities all over Australia, as notoriously exemplified in the Northern Territory Emergency Response. Hybridity is presented as a cultural choice of sharing, chiefly in Bobby's crossovers, but also in the interracial relationships between Jack Tar and Bobby's sister Binyan, and the deeply-felt and lived friendship between Dr Cross and Wunyeran.

### Alexis Wright and the Sense of Place

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<sup>38</sup> Fraser, in "Fully Booked," appendix to *That Deadman Dance* (2010), 6.

Alexis Wright's fiction operates on both sides of the gender divide: whereas *Plains of Promise* engages with a matrilineal story of three generations, *Carpentaria* focusses on three generations of Indigenous males, and *The Swan Book* combines the matrilineal and the patrilineal. Her first novel questions the politics of blame and guilt connected with the creation of the hybrid offspring of the Stolen Generations, and it problematizes the role of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous males in the survival of Indigenous society. The Indigenous evocation of a female holy trinity in Ivy–Mary–Jessie as the Holy Ghost/Eve–Mary–Jesus is ambiguously inscribed in biblical and Dreaming accounts and caught up relentlessly in the almost irreparable damage inflicted by Western colonization. While the text delivers a dis/empowering inscription of these three hybrid females in country through a powerful life-giving Dreaming secret, it also critically interrogates Indigenous dealings with a politics of gender and refuses facile one-to-one solutions to the complex issue of what Michèle Grossman calls the different versions of “received Aboriginality” addressed in the novel.<sup>39</sup> In *Plains of Promise*, Indigenous identity formation and the way it engages with the havoc wrought by the Stolen Generation policy upon Indigenous women remains a matter of debate. Indeed, it cuts across class by displaying their assimilation into a suburban middle-class milieu as a serious impediment in the search for an Indigenous sense of self.

*Carpentaria* manages a more optimistic inscription of Indigeneity by concentrating on a line of three generations of male Indigenes in their successful grassroots struggle to overcome the internal division of an Indigenous community and to undo the imposition of white culture, propelled by white middle-class values of land use, on their traditional area. In seeing Norm, Joseph, and Will working constructively toward empowering definitions of Indigenous manhood by restoring their nurturing links to country, Wright aims to de-demonize Indigenous men in gender conflict and creates room for Indigenous survival by incorporating both men and women in an untarnished account of love and procreation. The latter is strongly configured through the forging of the family unit of Will, Hope, and

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<sup>39</sup> Michèle Grossman, “Reach On Out to the Other Side,” 85–87.

Bala (meaning 'fellow' or 'brother'<sup>40</sup>), which arises from the destruction of white colonization on the coast of Desperance and reunifies the local Aborigines. This trinity's tight bonds are emblematic of the hope they embody for Indigenous survival and the recovery of the local habitat as the homeland and means of sustenance. As such, *Carpentaria* is a more transparent text than *Plains of Promise*, but by its epic incorporation of all "the big stories and the little ones in between,"<sup>41</sup> it is certainly no less unsettling in its deconstructive holistic urge to empower an Indigenous cosmogony of the Australian land.

*The Swan Book* endeavors to link continental environmental disaster to white mismanagement of the land at large and establishes causal links between the Western capitalist mode of production and lifestyle and Indigenous disempowerment, displacement, and dispossession on the local level. Wright's sympathy is clearly not with the larger and higher tiers of political organization which she deems responsible for the plight of the remote communities and Indigenous urban fringe, Australia's 'Fourth World'. Like *Plains of Promise*, *The Swan Book* debunks the Indigenous middle class of city professionals and politicians and extends its critique across class and gender through its description of the ruthless, self-interested, power-hungry, career-making Warren Finch, the future Head of Government and celebrated 'savior of the nation'. Finch's masculinist realpolitik is as controversial and unnerving as that of frontmen for the Indigenous cause in contemporary Australian politics. Finch's character echoes the lawyer, academic, and activist Noel Pearson, of Bagaarmugu and Guggu Yalanji descent and instrumental in the much-lamented conservative Howard cabinet's 2007 decision to occupy and control the Northern Territory's remote communities, and now again dubiously involved in the fight for constitutional inclusion and sovereignty.<sup>42</sup> Finch's profile also draws on his namesake Warren Mundine, a Bundjalung politician who swerved from left to right wing in 2012 in a move that met with political distrust, not least for

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<sup>40</sup> Nonie Sharp, "Fiction (review of *Carpentaria*)," *Island* 111 (Summer 2007): 64.

<sup>41</sup> Wright, *Carpentaria*, 12.

<sup>42</sup> Tony Birch, "'On what terms can we speak?' Refusal, resurgence and climate justice," *Coolabah* 24-25 (2018): 5-6.

his appointment by the neoliberal Abbott government in a key political position: Chair of the Indigenous Advisory Council, a Government think tank and counseling organ on Indigenous issues. Mundine is equally part of the current debate on sovereignty, defending vested western mining interests.<sup>43</sup>

Through promise in marriage, Warren Finch is both linked to Oblivia, the female protagonist whose traumatized life embodies the general dysfunctionality of the Indigenous community, and juxtaposed to her through his male urban middle-class location. Whereas Oblivia represents country and Dreaming, Warren is each time further removed from these and thus severed from his mob and assimilated to the mainstream, until the nightmare of his murder in land far from traditional country parts them forever, allowing Oblivia (and her swans) to return home to Swan Lake. Thus, various gendered themes (black velvet, trauma and madness, female disempowerment at the grass-roots level) and characters (Elliot Pugnose, Buddy Doolan) from *Plains of Promise* resonate in the novel, as does the larger environmental scope taken from *Carpentaria*, while it trades the hope in male leadership displayed in the latter novel for mistrust and mockery. It is ironic that the very Indigenous male who is destined, educated, and empowered to rule the land and nation is killed while his disempowered, traumatized wife is able to restore the Dreaming's life-giving forces by a return to traditional country.

### From End Times to New Times

The significance of these novels for the constitution of an Indigenous Australian corpus—whether they are finally included or not—is given by their blurring, leveling, and hence *postcolonizing* effects, activated by the liminal concept of the uncanny. As a marginal concept, the uncanny is never prototypical but questions the very borders of the category it pertains to. As an odd member of its class, its appearance implies un/belonging; hence, it ambiguously is (not) and defies definition. As a fuzzy concept, the uncanny is necessarily a

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<sup>43</sup> Birch, "On what terms can we speak?," 6.

dynamic, transitional term, since its manifestation in postcolonial fiction—'literature from the margins'—denotes the activation of a cultural interface of ex/change. Here mainstream categories of race, gender, and class as well as genre are rewritten by their exposure to a postcolonizing Other.

The fluid, disturbing character of the uncanny directly engages with our perception and reception of these instances of postcolonizing literature: they may estrange us from known frames of reference, causing discomfort. The uncanny is unsettling and disturbing because it intimately binds the homely to the unhomely, the familiar to the strange, the known to the unknown, the racialized, gendered, classist Self to the Other, and so on. It repackages hierarchically-organized, discrete binaries as interdependent wholes whose internal configuration is subject to adaptation, dissolution, and change; thus, it pushes binary principles of organization into an unaccommodating terrain of nonsignification that may 'voice' what a prevalent ideology's imperfect representation of reality has suppressed, to follow Slavoj Žižek's analysis.<sup>44</sup> For our postcolonizing purpose, the anguish caused by nonsignification can be glossed as fear of the dissolution of the autonomous self and the binary categories of race, gender, and class that sustain it. As argued in chapter 1, in fiction, particularly the postcolonizing fiction under discussion, the space nonsignification occupies beyond (colonial) discourse may be scripted figuratively, returning the ghostly as the unsettling mediation between life and death, between signification and its lack. Thus, the postcolonizing ghost participates in the demise of the colonial and the birth of the postcolonial simultaneously: end times and new times circulate in unsettling ways through phantasmagorical (non)existence.<sup>45</sup>

### Sally Morgan and the Uncanny

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<sup>44</sup> Slavoj Žižek, "The Spectre of Ideology," 25–26.

<sup>45</sup> I borrow the terms "end times" and "new times" from San Roque, "On Reading *Carpentaria*," 4 of 20.



*My Place* stages ghosts—considered as embodiments of the uncanny in fiction par excellence by Hélène Cixous<sup>46</sup>—so as to activate the reinscription of race, gender, and class. The need to retrieve the maternal in identity formation is emphasized by the ghostly development of the character of Sally's father and by the disturbing Gothic presence in her family history of her white grandfather Alfred Howden Drake-Brockman. A victim of white working-class impoverishment and of sexual trauma by virtue of his war experience, Bill Milroy develops a state of mental nonpresence which becomes increasingly frightening and eerie as the story unfolds, and is strongly suggestive of domestic violence. Sally's Indigenous grandmother also turns the domestic setting into a ghostly realm of haunting as she defies Sally's attempts to prise open her most intimate secrets relating to repeated incest and multiple hybrid offspring. Thus, *My Place* engages with the Gothic to depict the defamiliarizing effect of vexed sexualities on the postcolonizing home setting. However, *My Place* also stages ghosts on a metafictional level, as the elderly Aborigines who have given their life stories in Sally's custody speak out to the reader beyond physical death to haunt mainstream Australia with their uncomfortable truths. Unlike Edward Hills' suggestion, death's otherness may be political rather than apolitical in such a reading,<sup>47</sup> and the Indigenous corpses testifying to the impact of racial politics may be reintegrated into an Indigenous corpus of Aboriginal Reality. This offers the potential for the uncanny to be activated against deadly stasis and for a dynamic performance and re/inscription of hybrid Aboriginality, as testified to over the last two decades by such personal biographies as Morgan's.

### **Mudrooroo and the Uncanny**

Mudrooroo engages with the ghostly in a variety of ways to address the issue of identity formation and Indigenous survival. *Doctor*

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<sup>46</sup> Hélène Cixous, "Fiction and its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's *Das Unheimliche* (The 'uncanny')," *New Literary History* 7.3 (Spring 1976): 542–546. See also Chapter 1.

<sup>47</sup> Edward Hills, "'What Country, Friends, Is This?': Sally Morgan's *My Place* Revisited," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 32.2 (1997): 108.

*Wooreddy's Prescription* and *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* depict the confrontation between colonizer and colonized in a narrative that proceeds from Gothic disempowerment of the Indigenes toward a recovery of their forces through the incorporation of the Indigenous sacred. Their shamanic leaders engage in battle with the white missionary couple on the terrain of the Dreaming, and emerge victorious. As such, they are benign ghosts able to lead their people along a new songline to a more promising destination than the dismal island mission, translated into end times for the former and new times for the latter. However, *The Undying*, *Underground*, and *The Promised Land* see a return to the Gothic by full immersion in the gory presence of a colonial vampire which spells out a bleak future for Indigeneity. Thus, the Tasmanian quintet displays a circular movement into Indigenous disempowerment where change may be achieved only by the dissolution of all identity; it proposes an utterly new, undefinable corpo-reality, a Derridean spectrality in tune with the author's personal need for a deconstructive politics of the body.

Following Fanon's thought on instrumental and absolute violence in the process of decolonization, we can understand the author's desperate recourse to the iconic Victorian character of the vampire to point beyond sexual, class, and racial signification. The vampire, an undead creature preying on the blood of the living, metaphorically adjusts itself to the eugenicist obsession with 'the purity of blood' with which race relations were managed during most of Australia's Victorian and post-Victorian past, and thus it haunts essentialist notions in the current debate on Australianness. Speaking from the uncanny realm of nonsignification, the haunting vampiress represents Mudrooroo's de(con)structive contribution to the Australian identity debate and amounts to a reckoning with a conception of Indigeneity that excludes him. Thus, the Vampire trilogy traces a fictional songline strewn with Indigenous corpses, not least the author's own, whose Indigenous corpo-reality is suspended. The threesome develops toward Indigenous death and end times, while revealing the new times of Australianness as nihilistic and uncertain, beyond the control of its constitutive parts and agents. This ending ties in with Samira Kawash's belief that the identity arising out of postcolonizing conflict is beyond the parameters of its constitutive dialectics: neither worse nor better, "this 'new human' is something that cannot be known or predicted, foretold or produced,

but that simply comes."<sup>48</sup> Thus, the Australian physical and literary corpus that may postcolonize out of these new times remains undefined, inspiring hope and fear for the future at once. To be or not to be Indigenous is the issue that remains unresolved in Mudrooroo's disturbing fiction.

### Kim Scott and the Uncanny

By contrast, Kim Scott's engagement with the uncanny realm between life and death is undoubtedly empowering for the Indigenous community. Scott scripts this alternative discursive space straightforwardly as the realm of the Dreaming in *True Country*, *Benang*, and *That Deadman Dance*. In the first novel, the concept of the Dreaming is wrapped into Western experience as premonitory dreams in which the world of Indigenous experience manifests itself to Billy. Yet, when they connect with his Indigenous grand-uncle Walanguh, who appears as a ghostly character floating between life and death, the novel develops toward an Indigenous epistemology which speaks back from an unsettling in-between space to mainstream discourse. Billy moves from the incomprehension of his dreams to a full understanding of the Dreaming, or from Indigenous nonsignification to signification. This immersion in a different world of experience is consumed in Billy's own confrontation with the liminal space between life and death configured by the river. In his encounter with the meandering Rainbow Snake, Billy has to prove his worth to Indigeneity and may only thus fully enter the realm of the ghostly sacred. His initiation comes full circle in his resuscitation-cum-levitation at the local hospital, so that he may acquire the right aerial-spiritual elevation to merge his cultural and physical hybridity with country.

It is with this same healing scene of rebirth that *Benang* starts off, setting Harley out on a physical and spiritual journey into a hybrid form of Indigeneity. As the first white man born into the family,

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<sup>48</sup> Samira Kawash, "Terrorists and Vampires. Fanon's Spectral Violence of Decolonization," in *Frantz Fanon: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Anthony C. Alessandrini (London & New York: Routledge, 1999): 255–256. See also Chapter 3.

Harley is familiar with the worlds of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous experience, and his marginal expression of Indigeneity allows him to turn into a ghostly shaman or *djanak* with the power to 'sing' the westernized Australian land back into Indigenous country. The new songline he plots across Australian territory allows him to inscribe his own and the Stolen Generations' damaged corpo-realities back into country and recover a sense of Indigenous belonging. Through Harley's singing in *Benang*, the Indigenous corpses resulting from the genocidal experiment of absorption into the white mainstream may join their hybrid voices to reconstitute an Indigenous corpus of stories inhabiting the Australian land.

*That Deadman Dance* provides a straightforward narrative of the Nyoongar community willing to make room for the white settlers, whose ghostly appearance inspires Bobby Wabalanginy to devise the Deadman Dance in an attempt to contain interracial violence and find peaceful forms of coexistence on the basis of exchange and sharing. What start out as hopeful new times in this novel eventually translate into end times. Bobby's efforts at creating a transcultural bridge through dance and song lead to a dead-end songline, chiming with the demise of Reconciliation and the assimilative effect of today's Northern Territory Invasion on mainstream initiative. Bobby's Indigenous embodiment is spectralized during his last, instructive dance before a European audience, so that the Nyoongar account of genocidal history he means to denounce is whitewashed as well as obscured and cultural difference as Indigenous sovereignty obliterated. This surprising, saddening finale contrasts starkly with the hopeful beginnings of intercultural contact, which point at openness, respect, and conviviality rather than the violent takeover of country and extermination of its Ab/original population. In applying this sudden twist, Scott draws attention to the merits of the Nyoongar community in intercultural contact and the breach of social contract by the Europeans. *That Deadman Dance* embodies an 'alternative fiction', a new Dreaming narrative that runs up against the arrogance of white civilization and its imperial greed; indeed, there is still no treaty between settler and Indigenous Australia, and thus no acknowledgement of Indigenous sovereignty over country, and the novel appeals to new times by formalizing such an agreement to coexistence inspired by Nyoongar values of hospitality and sharing. Scott's use of Aboriginal Reality, though consciously

written from a male perspective, actively engages with Indigenous empowerment in a performative dynamics that leaves room to recover the sign of Australianness from an inclusionary, Indigenous point of view.

### **Alexis Wright and the Uncanny**

Alexis Wright's *Plains of Promise* configures the ghostly realm between life and death by drawing on the Gothic and the Dreaming. The Indigenous universe in the novel is filled with eerie people, animals, and plant-life that often signify in incomprehensible, unsettling ways to the mainstream reader. An exemplary specimen of hybrid nonsignification is configured by the Chinaman's ghost, who speaks out from the realm of the dead to the living with a disturbing truth: all are to blame for his gory murder, perhaps the most Gothic passage in the text. His denunciation of the rejection of hybridization as a valid cultural option aligns itself with the overall drive of the novel to spare neither Indigenous nor non-Indigenous society where identity politics are concerned. Thus, the Chinaman's comment also addresses and criticizes Ivy's figurative death. A maddened victim of the ostracization of hybridism by Indigenous and non-Indigenous society, the pale, ghostly Ivy appears at the end of the novel to connect the past to the future, deracination to origins, end times to new times. Her monstrous appearance defies her real significance, which is therefore not fully understood by her uninitiated daughter and granddaughter, and they consequently leave their traditional homeland in the hope of becoming reunited with country and kin in an unforeseeable future. Whether the novel spells hope or misery for the Stolen Generations and Indigeneity at large is disturbingly left suspended in this blend of postcolonizing Gothic and Dreaming Narrative. Yet again, to be or not to be Indigenous remains an unresolved issue.

*Carpentaria* hardly engages with the Gothic but displays all its metaphysical characters in their connection with the Indigenous sacred. The novel stages a powerful inscription in end times for white civilization and new times for Indigenous Australia by the supernatural destruction of Desperance and its mining economy. Defying epic biblical accounts of Western civilization's supremacy,

*Carpentaria* presents itself as an unsettling Antipodean counternarrative, an alternative origin story that slowly meanders through Gulf Country. The mythical Rainbow Serpent of the Dreaming gave birth to the Indigenous universe and its epistemology, and Norm and Will Phantom are its contemporary (super)human manifestations. Norm and Will are, as their family name indicates, ghosts that speak and act back from an unsettling realm of nonsignification suppressed by Western epistemological discourse. Furnished with destructive as well as life-giving shamanic potential, they reverse the vampiric thrust of colonization in their terrorizing of white society and mission so as to return life to the Indigenous community.

Beckoning toward mainstream understanding, the novel musters the combined force of the four classic elements of fire, water, air, and earth to sign white civilization's death warrant and recover the Australian land as Indigenous country in a clima(c)tic finale. Thus, *Carpentaria* becomes "a swelling, heaving, tsunami of a novel"<sup>49</sup> that collapses white history and myth into the Indigenous Dreaming and rewrites the past, present, and future of the land. In its adaptation of Western genre and myth to Indigenous form and content, *Carpentaria* is emblematic of the potential of Aboriginal Reality to remap Australian cultural, textual, bodily, and geographical territory into an Indigenous universe.

*The Swan Book's* content and political agenda is built around the trope of the black swan, which mediates between the Real and the Dreaming and blurs the distinction between the two into a single Everywhen. In their totemic relationship to the female protagonist, Oblivia, the black swans are the sign of the Aborigine's (non)existence on the Australian map. They are the discursive device that Wright employs to question the epistemological limits of Western thinking, at heart a critique of the Enlightenment paradigm that enthrones European civilization over others; it also serves to address the very real dispossession and disenfranchisement that large parts of the Indigenous communities still experience. Significantly, the political debate these days centers on making Aborigines constitutional citizens without addressing the issue of

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<sup>49</sup> Michèle Grossman, "Risk, Roguery and Revelation," 10.

sovereignty by means of a treaty, which may be read as just another not entirely subtle way to ensure their assimilation into the mainstream. The resilience of the Northern Territory Intervention aligns with such a hidden agenda of Indigenous dispossession.

The black swan exemplifies the state of Indigenous non/belonging in Australian discursive and physical territory; it is the metaphorical black w(h)ole that (dis)embodies the Aboriginal Australian, an uncanny discursive sign of life and death that is structurally linked to Oblivia's damaged womanhood, her innate capacity to procreate and regenerate that has been damaged by sexual trauma. Olivia, who through her totemic relationship with the displaced black swans is ontologically connected to Swan Lake, the swampy dump near her homeland, has essentially become sterile, the victim of Indigenous dysfunctionality and mainstream realpolitik in the area. Her barrenness stands for the greater drama of the Indigenous communities' inability to forge a viable future by themselves, which through the Dreaming translates into environmental collapse. Oblivia's only defense is to forget, as her name intimates, and claim an ahistoricity that harks back to the eugenicist, essentialist visions of Indigeneity that fixed it in a nostalgic, static past and signified its impending demise. Oblivia's marriage to Warren Finch, the part-Indigenous Prime Minister who has sold out to the mainstream, must remain childless precisely because of Finch's assimilation to white discourse and because of Oblivia's trauma, precipitated by her own people.

Whereas Warren's death would seem to enable Oblivia's happy return to Swan Lake after an epic journey in the company of her swans, *The Swan Book* ends on an ambiguous note regarding the chances of Indigeneity recreating itself: written from the vantage point of the twenty-second century, it offers an apocalyptic vision of Australia's future, with the earth's climate thrown out of control by sustained human interference through the wasteful Western mode of production which wreaks havoc upon the continent and the world at large. The Dreaming in this dystopian scenario is profoundly disturbed, although Oblivia and her totemic birds may return to country and reclaim their origin. Whether the ending of the novel spells good for the Indigenous Nations remains to be seen. Yet, the Dreaming story that closes the narrative reveals a natural world beyond the power and control of the continent's human players and

may very well suggest that whatever initiative we take, the greater, decisive force is in the land. By performing the reestablishment of environmentally-sound, life-restoring connections between humans and country through the literary, Aboriginal Reality, now no longer an uncanny manifestation, becomes a canny manifesto of epistemological difference.

### Antipodean Lessons

Australia is generally imagined as a society based on European core values, promoting a system of participative democracy based on the individual freedom, solidarity, and equality of its citizens. However, Australia is not a typical member of the category 'Western societies', owing to its marginal, Antipodean location and demographic peculiarities. While its foundation as a white nation has its origins in the penal-colonial vicissitudes of poor criminalized metropolitan outcasts, its postcolonizing efforts to be "truly the land of the fair go and the *better* chance"<sup>50</sup> do not outdo its European peers in providing equal opportunities for its population. Its traditional self-definition as a Western nation prioritizes male Anglo-Celtic middle-class values but hides the traces of the underprivileged First Nations' older presence as well as those of the so-called 'New Australians'. While the Aborigines occupied the Australian continent forty to sixty millennia before Europeans first settled it in the late eighteenth century, their presence was quickly erased by the white tabula rasa narrative of *terra nullius*. Nevertheless, their claims on the nature of Australian identity and country have recently found enough legal support to make what the European settler deemed home less homely, revealing a contested palimpsest of Indigenous belonging to country.

The Australian identity debate also has an international aspect. White Australia has always aimed at containing the blurring effects of non-European immigration on national identity through the

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<sup>50</sup> Paul Keating, "Australian Launch of the International Year for the World's Indigenous People," in *Apology Australia* (1992), <http://www.apology.west.net.au/redfern.html> (accessed 29 March 2002) (emphasis added).



application of policies with different degrees of assimilative thrust, from the moment of Federation in 1901 to the multiculturalism of the 1980s. As First Nations enjoy settler primacy, Aboriginal Australians have been arguably assigned improperly to the catch-all realm of multiculturalism, which is at bottom a policy geared at integrating immigrants from different cultural backgrounds into Western mainstream society on the recognition of cultural diversity; this mis/placement has set the mainstream effort to accommodate Indigeneity into the settler nation and recover it in/for Australia against a singular Indigenous struggle to rewrite Australianness from a position of prior Indigenous situatedness and ongoing sovereignty. Despite appearances, Australia should be considered as an uncanny fringe member of its class, a condition which heightens its potential to express the unsettling tensions in national self-definition to which more prototypical members of Western societies are less visibly subjected—though contemporary developments in Europe may indicate otherwise. In touch with incommensurable cultural difference, the makeup of Australia's physical and cultural space(s) thrusts identity trouble into extreme positions of conflict, to the point where, in the absence of a treaty, the inclusion of the Indigenes in the Constitution may be questioned in, among, and rejected by the Indigenous communities, as the tensions around the Uluru Statement from the Heart (2017) show.

As I argued in the Introduction, one of Europe's salient features nowadays is a widespread fear of loss (of a sense of belonging, quality of life, and privileges) that is tied in with the processes of increased global migratory movement, economic dislocation, and the continent's supranational integration—notably the current Syrian refugee crisis. This anxiety has provoked a reactionary battle to contain the centrifugal tensions caused by increasing multiculturalism, a process which is felt to prey on Western Europe's wealth and resources. It is a battle in which Europe may see itself disturbingly mirrored in Australia, whose brief history of intercultural tensions and contested reversal of settler primacy may help to resituate the debate on European identity in terms of performance rather than as a return to essence—as Julia Kristeva wrote, European identity is a question mark, for better or for worse. Multiculturalist policies cannot be put into practice from a privileged majority view of originality and first settlement to which newcomers

are made to adapt. If Europeans were to do so, where does that leave their Australian offspring who could not substantiate a claim to original occupation and culture and therefore signed their inscription in the land with Indigenous blood? The answer is not to be found in the attempt to efface cultural difference by imposing the majority culture on indigenous peoples and newly arrived cultural minorities but in jointly negotiating new cultural spaces within the finite sustainability and co-inhabitation of the land. As *That Deadman Dance* records, in Australia, Indigenous resistance to white settlement normally produced itself only when such a negotiation failed to obtain and unilateral white occupation threatened to expel the Indigenous from their natural habitat.<sup>51</sup>

The foregoing chapters have argued that the parameters of any identity debate do well to avoid essentialism and immanent biological difference. There exists no framework of originality and authenticity which marks some people as better or worse or more entitled than others; rather, we can follow Homi Bhabha and Judith Butler in asserting that identity is ceaselessly negotiated in the flux of performance, imperfectly copied, adapted, or reinvented and therefore always open to change. Charles Darwin entertained the conviction that race as such does not exist, and biological variety within and across species has been found to perform on a genetic continuum rather than through its discrete presence or absence. Similar observations can be made regarding class, once a category based on immanent features such as aristocratic blood, the merchant's innate greed, the working class's lack of intellectual skills

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<sup>51</sup> Attwood writes that "Aboriginal people did not necessarily object to initial intrusion by settlers, but rather to settlers insisting later that the land (or control over it) was exclusively theirs." He quotes Henry Reynolds in support and also highlights the anthropologist Les Hiatt's observation: "the existence [...] of an ethic of reciprocal hospitality [among Aborigines] facilitating a sharing of resources while simultaneously affirming the right of hosts to give or withhold"—see Bain Attwood, *Telling the Truth About Aboriginal History* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2005): 148–149. Kim Scott's *That Deadman Dance* makes precisely this point. See also Inga Clendinnen, *Dancing with Strangers* (2003; Melbourne: The Text Publishing Company, 2005), which offers a fascinating and convincing recreation of the processes of occupation and intercultural (mis)communication upon first contact in present-day Sydney, and mixes historical records with current anthropological knowledge.

etc., but nowadays it is socio-economically defined as an individual or group's level of access to the sources of production. Gender is a no less fluid category: once it was considered a natural, biologically-ordained distribution of role patterns between the sexes but nowadays the understanding of male and female behavior is seen as culturally rather than genetically inscribed, and as open to multiple permutations. This leaves the question of why the Indigenous Australians may boast settler primacy in the service of rewriting Australianness, as this is at apparent odds with performative notions of identity. The answer must be sought in mainstream and Indigenous society's unequal access to power and resources.

### **Minority and Majority Discourse**

Aborigines have long been the victim of colonialist thinking, which defined them as more primitive, less intelligent, less human, less apt for survival and therefore unworthy to occupy a place in Australia as citizens among citizens, and in view of need for a treaty and the debate on constitutional inclusion, this is still the case. As a lesser life form officially subsumed under Australian fauna, they were conveniently believed to be disappearing from the face of the earth so as to accommodate a 'higher evolutionary form'—the European. Among those ethnic groups trying to carve out an existence in Australia other than the Anglo-Celtic and Western European, the Indigenes have undoubtedly suffered most in the past two hundred years. This deep suffering was provoked by the colonial thrust of the British Empire, whose need to sustain its wealth propelled it into territorial expansion overseas. The search for and control of colonial resources for the European market was justified by a humanist and Christian mission of universal enlightenment and progress among the colonized, who in Orientalist vein were consequently seen as racially inferior to the invaders. In order to take legal control of the Australian land mass, it was imperative for Empire to adhere to the fiction of *terra nullius*, the myth of a tabula rasa which could be occupied peacefully. In other words, the Indigenous Australians were dehumanized in order to justify their disappearance from the colonial map of the continent.

Extermination was already common practice among nineteenth-century settlers who hunted Aborigines down to erase their presence from the land. Opportunist human scaling, reminiscent of the Great Chain of Being,<sup>52</sup> was later backed up by social-Darwinist thought, giving rise to official policies of genocide in the service of a white(ned) Australia.<sup>53</sup> In the twentieth century, the Australian application of eugenics produced a disenfranchised underclass of dispossessed ‘full-blood’ racial rejects kept in mission reserves while many ‘hybrid’ Aborigines were selected on the basis of skin color for ‘biological absorption’ into the white race through institutionalized removal, a policy known as the Stolen Generations. After the fascist horrors of the Second World War, whose Holocaust was the inhuman end result of eugenics, absorption assumed the more socially focussed guise of assimilation—and disappearance—into the mainstream by incorporating Aboriginal Australians into the neoliberal practices of the marketplace.<sup>54</sup>

The Indigenous recovery of recent decades has been the result of resistance to this process of cultural and demographic erasure, and after the protest movements of the 1960s, multiculturalist social engineering attempted to find an answer to the Indigenous (mis)fit in the nation by invoking respect for cultural diversity as a key concept. Indigenous demands for the right of self-definition, self-management, and self-determination have been responded to through legislative changes such as the 1967 Referendum on Aboriginal Citizenship, the

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<sup>52</sup> The belief that all things and creatures in nature are organized in a hierarchy from inanimate objects at the bottom to God at the top. It developed out of medieval European culture and, though often unspecified, formed the epistemological background to Renaissance and Enlightenment thought, and still informs many of the hierarchies applied in eurocentric analysis—see George Lakoff & Mark Turner, *More Than Cool Reason. A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1989): 213.

<sup>53</sup> For a detailed justification of the term ‘genocide’ to describe the Aboriginal plight, see Attwood, *Telling the Truth about Aboriginal History*, and Dirk A. Moses, “Introduction” to *Genocide and Settler Society. Frontier Violence and Stolen Indigenous Children in Australian History*, ed. Moses (2004; New York & Oxford: Berghahn, 2005): 3–48.

<sup>54</sup> Patrick Dodson, “Whatever happened to Reconciliation?” in *Coercive Reconciliation: Stabilise, Normalise, Exit Aboriginal Australia*, ed. Jon Altman & Melinda Hinkson (North Carlton, Melbourne: Arena, 2007): 25.

1975 Racial Discrimination Act, the 1976 Aboriginal Land Rights Act, and the 1993 Native Title Act. These legal changes have not proven far-reaching enough to reverse the status of the Aborigines as an underclass, but at present they offer some, if not the only, means of improving the abject living conditions of parts of this minority making up just over half a million people or 2.5% of the total Australian population.<sup>55</sup>

Of additional help in policy-making and execution has been the adaptation of the United-Nations benchmark definition of indigeneity into a standard Commonwealth definition of Indigeneity based on descent, self-identification, and community recognition. Although the

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<sup>55</sup> The Australian Bureau of Statistics summarizes its 2006 findings as follows: "Following changes to the Australian Constitution as a result of the 1967 Referendum, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were to be included in official estimates of the Australian population [...]. The preliminary Indigenous estimated resident population of Australia was, at 30 June 2006, 517,200 or 2.5% of the total population. This preliminary estimate is 14% higher than the 2006 unadjusted Census count (455,028), and primarily reflects adjustments for net undercount and unknown Indigenous status [...]. In terms of absolute numbers, New South Wales (148,200) and Queensland (146,400) had the largest Indigenous estimated resident populations, followed by Western Australia (77,900) and the Northern Territory (66,600) [...]. In the Northern Territory, 32% of the population was estimated to be of Indigenous origin. In all other states/territories less than 4% of people were estimated to be of Indigenous origin [...]. Over the past 20 years, the Census count of Indigenous people has doubled from 227,593 in 1986. This high level of growth is a result of natural increase (the excess of births over deaths) and non-demographic factors such as people identified as being of Indigenous origin for the first time in the Census [...]. In 2006, 31% of Indigenous people in Australia lived in Major Cities; 22% lived in Inner Regional Australia; 23% in Outer Regional Australia; 8% in Remote Australia and 16% in Very Remote Australia. States with a relatively high proportion of Indigenous people living in Major Cities included South Australia (48% of the total state Indigenous Census count on a usual residence basis), Victoria (48%) and New South Wales (42%). In contrast, 81% of the population both identified as Indigenous and counted in the Northern Territory lived in Remote/Very Remote areas. Likewise in Western Australia, 41% of the Indigenous population lived in Remote/Very Remote areas"—see "Population Distribution, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians," *Australian Bureau of Statistics* (15 August 2007), [http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/subscriber.nsf/0/377284127F903297CA25733700241AC0/\\$File/47050\\_2006.pdf](http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/subscriber.nsf/0/377284127F903297CA25733700241AC0/$File/47050_2006.pdf) (accessed 30 July 2009).

concept of descent is open to biological and/or social interpretation, in Australia it remains biologically tainted within the realm of Indigeneity. While the Commonwealth interpretation is largely socially inscribed and supported by the vast majority of Indigenous Australians, many of them insist upon a—however remote—genetic link in addition to recognized, lived Indigenous experience. As argued in chapter 3, rather than introducing an uncritical return to eugenicist times and thinking, this insistence may serve to ward off undue appropriations of Indigeneity as the means to claim access to resources—such as land, education, healthcare, welfare, and housing—that are allocated with special Indigenous provisions within the present politico-legal arrangement. This is how one should understand the insistence on genetic proof as well as lived experience and community acceptance in the authentication of Indigeneity.

Working on the basis of the temporal closure of Indigenous identity, a strategic politics of the body is implemented to further the recovery of the Indigenous community. Thus, in answer to the question “why a small amount of Nyoongar blood can make you [an Indigenous Australian], while any amount of white blood needn’t make you white,” Kim Scott argues: “It’s considered a *political* position, intended to foreground *inequalities* in our society, and particularly in our history.”<sup>56</sup> This need for strategic positioning in the face of socio-historical inequality, then, may account for Indigenous Australians employing a partially essentialist notion of belonging to country. The performance of the sign Indigenous in a politics of recovery may disturbingly have to fall back on the very contours of the essentialist thinking that made the Indigenous community a mistreated minority in the first place. This paradox is also in line with the observation that “any conception or treatment of [identitarian] space is always informed by the politics of history, even when the ideal of a space beyond the boundaries of cultural conventions implies their erasure.”<sup>57</sup> Amanda Nettlebeck’s comment

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<sup>56</sup> Kim Scott & Hazel Brown, *Kayang and Me* (Fremantle, WA: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2005): 207 (emphasis added).

<sup>57</sup> Amanda Nettlebeck, “Cultural Identity and the Narration of Space: A Reading of David Malouf,” in *From A Distance: Australian Writers and Cultural Displacement*, ed. Hazel Rowley & Wenche Ommundsen (Geelong, Victoria: Deakin UP, 1996):

here reminds us that an ideal of identity formation beyond restrictive binaries cannot be achieved by simply ignoring/erasing them; new identities can only be performed on the basis of building on, and from, current socio-political, legal, and material contexts.

The above implies that a strategic employment of Indigenous identity refers not only to the past but also to the future; it ambiguously contains the seed for end times as well as new times. Indeed, current Indigenous politics of the body propose a recovery of the sign Indigenous not as part of Western society but by rewriting its very epistemology on the basis of an Australian situatedness or ontological belonging to country, such as in the work of Aileen Moreton-Robinson. Traditional Western thinking is universalist, hierarchically organized, and divisive, creating categories based on self/other distinctions. By contrast, Indigenous epistemology brings the configuration and mechanics of the universe back to the life-giving connections of all matter to the land—organized in a rhizomatic variety of interrelated and interdependent life forms within an animate geography. As Deborah Rose explains, Indigenous conceptions of country defy notions of hierarchical food chains and individual gain, but organize life in horizontal relationships of mutual benefit and support, whether direct or indirect.<sup>58</sup> The land as a sacred self-governing and self-supporting sentient system calls into being a variety of interdependent life forms; it translates incompletely into Western thinking as environmentalist care for ecological habitats, because this does not reflect the deep spirituality with which Indigenous country is imbued. Indeed, characterized by respect for all its manifestations of life and with its multiple points of entry for agency and sentience, the concept of ‘country’ undoes the Western subject-object binary in favor of the subject-subject relationship,<sup>59</sup> reminiscent of a rhizomatic organization of knowledge and agency. The postcolonizing rewriting of the Australian land as country implies a leveling of binary Western thinking and is tied up with the dissolution of such discrete

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82. She makes this comment regarding David Malouf’s romantic inscriptions of identity into Australian space.

<sup>58</sup> Rose, “An Indigenous Philosophical Ecology,” 295–303.

<sup>59</sup> Rose, “An Indigenous Philosophical Ecology,” 302–303 (emphasis added).

hierarchical categories as race, gender, and class—and genre in the case of the literary.

Aileen Moreton-Robinson teases out the epistemological differences between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous world of experience, which she describes as ontologically connected to country in the Indigenous case, and to migrancy in the case of non-Indigenous Australians. She refuses the effacing impact of mainstream assimilation, arguing that Aborigines may perform whiteness out of need or interest but never lose their intimate, “constitutive” connection to country. Positing the inherently located character of Indigenous identity, she therefore disagrees with the deconstructionist critique of a strategic-essentialist politics of the body on the ground that this is equally informed by a universalist epistemological discourse:

It may be argued that to suggest an ontological relationship to describe Indigenous belonging is essentialist or is a form of strategic essentialism because I am imputing an essence to belonging. From an Indigenous epistemology, what is essentialist is the premise upon which such criticism depends: the Western definition of the self as not unitary nor fixed [...] The anti-essentialist critique is commendable but is premised on a contradiction embedded within the Western construction of essentialism; it is applied as a universal despite its epistemological recognition of difference.<sup>60</sup>

In Moreton-Robinson’s vision, Indigenous Australian identity as belonging to country implies an ontological relationship irreducible to European essentialism or relativism. It follows that the true contribution of the debate on Indigeneity to an innovative conception of identity formation lies beyond the mobilization of subject and object, self and other, essence and acquisition, nature and nurture as antagonistic forces. As the current definition of Australian Indigeneity implies, neither of the constituents of any of the binary pairs mentioned can be engaged in isolation to express identity;

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<sup>60</sup> Moreton-Robinson, “I Still Call Australia Home,” 32.



rather, they perform on a continuum to re/configure Australianness at large.

Such a vision of identity formation would inscribe the redefinition of Australianness as a postcolonizing as well as Indigenizing process of physical and spiritual belonging to country—by ontologically understanding human existence as an inseparable part of a greater living material and spiritual whole that requires respect and care for all its manifestations on a symbiotic basis of interrelatedness and interdependency. It appears that there is a disposition among many non-Indigenous Australians to move in such a direction. For example, in his official address to the nation on Australia Day in 2002, the white Australian environmental scientist Tim Flannery said:

Australia—the land, its climate and creatures and plants—is the only thing that we all, uniquely, share in common. It is at once our inheritance, our sustenance, and the only force ubiquitous and powerful enough to craft a truly Australian people. It ought to—and one day will—define us as a people like no other.<sup>61</sup>

Similarly, the renowned mainstream writer David Malouf highlights the role the literary plays in Indigenizing the concept of Australianness:

our only way of grasping our history—and by history I really mean what has happened to us, and what determines what we are now and where we are now—the only way of really coming to terms with that is by people's entering into it in their imagination, not by the world of facts, but by being there. And the only thing really which puts you there in that kind of way is fiction.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Tim Flannery, "Australia Day Address 2002: The day, the land, the people," *Australia Day* (2002), [http://www.australiaday.com.au/tim\\_welcome.html](http://www.australiaday.com.au/tim_welcome.html) (accessed 18 July 2005).

<sup>62</sup> Helen Daniel, "Interview with David Malouf," *Australian Humanities Review* 3 (September 1996), <http://www.lib.latrobe.edu.au/AHR/archive/Issue-Sept-1996/intermal.html> (accessed 31 May 2005). These remarks by Malouf relate to the agenda of his novel *Remembering Babylon* (1993).

In Malouf's view, understanding Australian history becomes a matter of reliving the past through a fictionalizing process that creates a D/dreaming capable of restoring the nation's spiritual economy. He thus consciously employs a vocabulary that aims at building a bridge between the European and Indigenous tradition:

The readers are then able to take all of that into their consciousness and their imaginations so that it's moved out of the world of fact into something like the world of experience—but more like dream experience than real experience [...] societies can only become whole, can only know fully what they are when they have relived history in that kind of way.<sup>63</sup>

From an Indigenous point of view, the question of the common inheritance of the land addressed by Flannery would surely be debatable, because whose and what kind of ownership are we dealing with? Also, the issue of rewriting history through fiction is problematic, as fiction's purported agenda may not necessarily produce the desired factual result but end up caught in disquieting ambiguities; Malouf's reimaginings of the Australian past have met with praise as well as resistance from mainstreamers and Indigenes,<sup>64</sup> which shows that the process of Indigenizing official white History—by the contested New Australian History movement and in politically engaged contemporary fiction—is not straightforward but highly complex.

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<sup>63</sup> Daniel, "Interview with David Malouf." These remarks by Malouf relate to the agenda of his novel *Remembering Babylon* (1993).

<sup>64</sup> Whether this novel has achieved its postcolonizing aims has been a matter of academic debate—for a good overview, see Lyn McCredden, "Craft and Politics: Remembering Babylon's Postcolonial Responses," *Southerly* 59.2 (Winter 1999): 5. See <http://find.galegroup.com.ezproxy.scu.edu.au/itx/start.do?prodId=EAIM> (accessed 11 April 2009); for an analysis from the Indigenous point of view, see Garry Kinnane, "Remembering Babylon and the use of history," in *Agora* 36.4 (2001): 7–12, <http://search.informit.com.au.ezproxy.scu.edu.au/fullText;dn=200202761;res=APAF> (accessed 11 April 2009).

It is clear that mainstream Australia still has a long way to go in order to come to terms with Indigeneity as indispensable to, and a decisive constituent of, Australianness, and this is as much a practical affair as a symbolic process which is played out in the ongoing demand for constitutional recognition, compensation, and sovereignty. Indigenous communities enjoy more autonomy than in the past, federal legislation has seen some adjustment to Indigenous demands and needs, and an official Apology for the Stolen Generations policy was offered at long last, less than a decade ago, to the First Australians. These would seem to be steps in the right direction—or perhaps not? What has the general mainstream attitude to, and agenda of, Reconciliation been over the last three decades?

### **Assimilation, Self-Determination, and Sovereignty**

Federal Prime Minister John Howard, voted into office for three consecutive terms from 1996 to 2008, openly marketed an assimilationist agenda. He stubbornly refused to apologize for the damage inflicted by the official child removal policy of the Stolen Generations, and thus disregarded and ignored the findings and recommendations of the 1997 *Bringing-Them-Home* report. The Howard government also quickly passed the 1998 Native Title Amendment Act with its reactionary program of extinguishing Native title rights in the current federal legislation. Furthermore, Howard's proposal to abolish the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), an institution which—for better or for worse—had signified the Indigenous Australians' active involvement in their own government since 1990, was passed by both houses of Parliament in 2005 with bipartisan support. The ATSIC's tasks were then subsumed under the Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs.

All of this constituted a reactionary effort to curb the ongoing demand for self-determination and self-government—sovereignty—by the broad majority of the Indigenous community as the solution to their plight, as well as confirming ingrained mainstream blindness to the structural problems informing Indigenous society's dysfunctional condition. Howard's assimilative agenda on the First Australians

culminated in his government's military intervention in the Northern Territory on 21 June 2007—ironically, the very day Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* received the Miles Franklin Literary Award. The Indigenous leader Patrick Dodson<sup>65</sup> notes that the process of Reconciliation in the 1990s has not paved the way to recognition of traditional ownership, Indigenous sovereignty, and their place within the nation at large, and sees the Northern Territory Intervention as revelatory of the Australian nation's dysfunctionality at large:

The Howard Government's "national emergency" intervention reveals a fundamental government failure in Indigenous public policy. The social crisis in Indigenous communities demonstrated in its most emotive manifestation—the sexual abuse of children—reveals a far greater crisis in Australian nationhood.<sup>66</sup>

The case of the Northern Territory Intervention is paradigmatic of the control the Indigenous people continue to lack over their own lives. The invasion of local authority was made possible by the Northern Territory's incomplete federal status; as it is not a state among other federal states but a 'major mainland territory', its Parliament's legislation can be overridden by Commonwealth decision.

The latter is precisely what happened in this politically-underdeveloped area whose Aboriginal Australian population represents 32% of its total, a much higher percentage than any of the Australian states. With the excuse of creating the conditions to

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<sup>65</sup> "Patrick Dodson is a Yawuru man from Broome in Western Australia and is the Chairman of the Lingiari Foundation, an Indigenous non-government advocacy and research foundation. He is Director of the Central Land Council and the Kimberley Land Council, a former Royal Commissioner into the Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, and for six years was the Chairman of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation. He is currently the Chairman of the Kimberley Development Commission"—see Jon Altman & Melinda Hinkson, *Coercive Reconciliation: Stabilise, Normalise, Exit Aboriginal Australia*, ed. Altman & Hinkson (North Carlton, Melbourne: Arena 2007): 238.

<sup>66</sup> Patrick Dodson, "Whatever happened to Reconciliation?" in *Coercive Reconciliation*, ed. Altman & Hinkson, 21.

prevent the ongoing child sexual abuse in remote Indigenous communities—itself the dysfunctional outcome of relentless mainstream meddling in Indigenous affairs—the intervention suspended local Indigenous powers of government and so trampled upon the notions of Indigenous self-rule and self-determination.<sup>67</sup> Ostensibly staged as a humanitarian gesture in response to the *Little Children Are Sacred* report<sup>68</sup> but sadly reminiscent of the Stolen-

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<sup>67</sup> Melinda Hinkson writes: “In the name of protecting children, the Commonwealth announced it would introduce [...] measures, to apply to all people living in remote NT Aboriginal communities,” directed at putting trouble areas in the Northern Territory under Commonwealth control. Backed up by three emergency-response bills, the legislation was passed with bipartisan support and “enables the federal government to

- control the way *all* Aboriginal people living in prescribed townships in the Northern Territory can spend their welfare payments (with no provision for exemption)
- control goods and services, including alcohol, pornographic material, gambling and tobacco
- confer new powers on police to enter private property without warrant to pursue a person believed to be affected by alcohol
- require detailed records be kept for three years of all users of all computers purchased with government funds
- direct courts not to take customary law or cultural practices into account in setting bail conditions or sentencing.

The legislation also confers on the Commonwealth the power to:

- vary or terminate unilaterally alter existing funding agreements with community organisations
- direct people to undertake specified tasks through the Work for the Dole scheme
- direct government-funded assets to be used for specific tasks
- gain oversight over local government processes, including the right to have a government representative attend meetings of a government-funded organisation, and to sack employees of government-funded bodies
- supervise and control community government councils
- assess and appoint new managers of community stores
- exclude any person, including a traditional owner, from the land compulsorily leased.”

See Melinda Hinkson, “Introduction: In the Name of the Child,” in *Coercive Reconciliation: Stabilise, Normalise, Exit Aboriginal Australia*, ed. Jon Altman & Melinda Hinkson (North Carlton, Melbourne: Arena, 2007): 1–4.

<sup>68</sup> Rex Wild, Julie Nicholson & Patricia Anderson, *Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle: “Little Children Are Sacred”: Report of the Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse* (Darwin:

Generation policy of absorptionist and assimilationist days,<sup>69</sup> the intervention was meant to boost voter support for the conservatives in the upcoming federal elections, as well as being geared to the imposition of a neoliberal policy of Indigenous self-help, far outstripping its official purpose. Jon Altman lists the regressive consequences of the emergency legislation, which range from curbing welfare, supervising community activities and projects, and imposing mandatory work on the unemployed to contracting professional managers in local government, and highlights how the federal government is fully aware that these measures of reform are “racially discriminatory” but defends them with the perverse, worn argument that they are “beneficial” within “the terms of the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* and the Constitution.”<sup>70</sup>

In short, the Howard Government’s agenda sought a solution to the social breakdown affecting remote Indigenous communities—ingrained poverty, poor education, unemployment, alcohol and drug abuse, sexual and physical violence, poor health, state and welfare dependency—in Indigenous failure to assimilate to neoliberal mainstream society. As Melissa Hinkson writes,

the NT intervention is aimed at nothing short of the production of a newly oriented, ‘normalised’ Aboriginal population, one whose concern with custom, kin and land will give way to the individualistic aspirations of private home ownership, career, and self-improvement. It is suggested that this is the only possible way forward for Aborigines.<sup>71</sup>

Similarly, Patrick Dodson argues:

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Northern Territory Government, 30 April 2007), <http://www.inquirysaac.nt.gov.au/> (accessed 10 July 2015).

<sup>69</sup> See Michael Dodson, “Bully in the Playground: A New Stolen Generation?” in *Coercive Reconciliation: Stabilise, Normalise, Exit Aboriginal Australia*, ed. Jon Altman & Melinda Hinkson (North Carlton, Melbourne: Arena, 2007): 85–97.

<sup>70</sup> Jon Altman, “In the Name of the Market?” in *Coercive Reconciliation: Stabilise, Normalise, Exit Aboriginal Australia*, ed. John Altman & Melinda Hinkson (North Carlton, Melbourne: Arena, 2007): 311.

<sup>71</sup> Hinkson, “Introduction: In the Name of the Child,” 6.

The current battle ground of the assimilation agenda is located on the vast new region of northern and central Australia where Indigenous people maintain their languages, own their traditional lands under Western legal title, and practise their customs whilst seeking to survive on public sector programs whose poor design has resulted in entrenched dependency.<sup>72</sup>

It appears, then, that multiculturalist piecemeal engineering has not substantially alleviated the situation of chronic social breakdown that many remote Indigenous communities find themselves in, and this failure has paved the way for a conservative return to an assimilationist agenda. Yet, John Howard was ousted by Labor in the federal elections of November 2007, which suggested the recovery of a less aggressive, more reconciliatory mainstream agenda. As the first point of government action, the Prime Minister elect Kevin Rudd moved a Motion of Apology to the First Australians for the damage inflicted by white colonization and for the plight of the Stolen Generations in particular, which was presented to and passed by Parliament on 18 February 2008. Just half a year earlier, the mainstream philosopher Raimond Gaita had written, of Rudd's pledge "to apologise to the Aborigines for the wrongs done to them since settlement":

everyone now knows that an apology would mean nothing if it were not part of a practical concern to alleviate the material and psychological misery of many of the Aboriginal communities.<sup>73</sup>

And indeed, a fully sourced and funded program for improving the grim state of many Aborigines<sup>74</sup> remains to be formulated and

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<sup>72</sup> Dodson, "Whatever happened to Reconciliation?" 22.

<sup>73</sup> Raimond Gaita, "The Moral Force of Reconciliation," in *Coercive Reconciliation: Stabilise, Normalise, Exit Aboriginal Australia*, ed. Jon Altman & Melinda Hinkson (North Carlton, Melbourne: Arena, 2007): 303.

<sup>74</sup> Alexis Wright speaks of "the living hell of the lives of many Aboriginal people" (Wright, "Politics of Writing," 14). Note also Marcia Langton's recent statement that "Aboriginal society is sliding into a terminal state of under-development,"

implemented, and was not attached to this highly emotional, symbolic national event. Neither did Labor rule lead to the suspension of the Northern Territory Intervention; though it softened some of its harsher aspects, it basically continued the support it had already given to the “Emergency Response” formulated under Howard’s premiership. A darker reading of these maneuvers is that Rudd’s Apology was offered to create the adequate political climate for the intervention to continue.

The later, conservative Abbott administration’s take (2013–2015) on Indigenous affairs, especially sovereignty, treaty, and constitutionality as well as its revival of the restrictive White Australia attitude in refugee policy, has been equally foreboding because of its mutually reinforcing assimilationist character. Abbott’s Liberal Party successor, the current PM Malcolm Turnbull, fares no differently and has publicly disavowed the Indigenous push for constitutional recognition, a treaty, and stable Parliamentary representation as expressed in the controversial Uluru Statement from the Heart (2017); like Rudd, he favors a return to symbolic rather than practical recognition, which would be “too ambitious’ and [...] not get majority support.”<sup>75</sup>

Almost two decades into the twenty-first century, the heritage of Labor and Conservative ‘neo-assimilationist’ rule indicates that a viable answer to Indigenous difference and what is called their ‘dysfunctionality’ is not to be found in a leveling recognition of cultural diversity but should be focussed through respect for cultural difference and all that this entails in terms of active policy-making by, and self-determination for, the Indigenous population. Thus, the

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highlighting “the unassailable facts in hundreds of impoverished Aboriginal communities across remote Australia: radically shortened lives; the highest national rates of unemployment; widespread violence, endemic alcohol and substance abuse; the lowest national levels of education; and lifelong morbidity for hapless citizens suffering from heart disease, nutrition and lifestyle-related diseases such as diabetes”; Langton, “Trapped in the Aboriginal reality show,” *Griffith Review* 19 (Autumn 2008): 155, 158.

<sup>75</sup> Calla Wahlquist, “Turnbull’s Uluru statement rejection is ‘mean-spirited bastardry’—legal expert,” *The Guardian Australia* (26 October 2017), <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/oct/26/turnbulls-uluru-statement-rejection-mean-spirited-bastardry-legal-expert> (accessed 2 June 2018).



current constitutional debate, the demand for Indigenous sovereignty, and the care for and sustainability of country are inextricably connected. Raimond Gaita links the symbolic to the practical in highlighting the importance of opening up and listening to the Indigenous community in establishing what needs doing. Improvement in living conditions goes hand in hand with improvements in intercultural communication:

if we do not listen, if we do not encourage them, the Aborigines, to speak in their own voices, if we are not genuinely open to novel possibilities, if in advance of serious dialogue we shut our ears to talk of new forms of political association within the Commonwealth, if we yield to an impatient, false realism, then our apology will be self-indulgent and self-promoting, and our practical efforts patronising. The results are unforeseeable, but they will determine the ways that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples will be able to say, 'We Australians.'<sup>76</sup>

Patrick Dodson places the politics around the Apology and the Intervention in an international indigenous perspective and is thus able to pinpoint Indigenous self-determination and sovereignty as the key factors in improved communication and for a concomitant heightening of living standards to take place:

Australia's Indigenous people's key social and economic status, measured by data such as longevity, employment, incarceration and illness, was almost identical to Indigenous people in comparable countries in the early 1970s. Whilst Indigenous standards of living, particularly life expectancy, have improved dramatically in New Zealand and Canada, *where Indigenous self-determination is formal policy*, in Australia the situation for Indigenous people has not improved or has worsened.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Gaita, "The Moral Force of Reconciliation," 304.

<sup>77</sup> Dodson, "Whatever happened to Reconciliation?" 27-28 (emphasis added).

One may conclude that the basis for dialogue can only be created from a position of equality, which implies the constitutional right to Indigenous self-definition and self-determination on the claim that sovereignty has never been relinquished to the dominant culture—there is no treaty between the Australian First Nations and the federal union.

Guy Rundle finds that “the national emergency over Aboriginal child sexual abuse replayed many of the political themes and manoeuvres acted out on the global scale in the years since September 11, now projected into a domestic space.”<sup>78</sup> Similarly, John Sanderson takes a broader perspective on the Intervention to question the Howard policy of military solutions to social breakdown. He places the Northern Territory Intervention in the international context of neoliberal globalization, which fails to provide “a peaceful new world order.” He holds that the Twin Towers attack and related warfare in the Orient “defy the simplicity of the economic rationalist belief that the market will provide all the solutions to the complexity of a rapidly changing environment.”<sup>79</sup> This is especially so when military intervention is carried out with the intention of imposing a democracy of ‘free’ individuals and choice in the service of the capitalist mode of production. The longevity of the Iraq and Afghanistan occupations shows the fallacy of a strategy of moving in, deposing rulers, imposing democracy, and leaving people to their own devices and to mind their own business. Sanderson firmly believes—and rightly so, as we will see in the next section—that “Australia’s Indigenous people have been and continue to be the victims of a similar coercive market forces approach” which preaches the questionable benefits of Indigenous assimilation to a middle-class mainstream and continues the harmful exploitation of the land:

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<sup>78</sup> Guy Rundle, “Military Humanitarianism in Australia’s North,” in *Coercive Reconciliation: Stabilise, Normalise, Exit Aboriginal Australia*, ed. Jon Altman & Melinda Hinkson (North Carlton, Melbourne: Arena, 2007): 37.

<sup>79</sup> John Sanderson, “Reconciliation and the Failure of Neo-Liberal Globalisation,” in *Coercive Reconciliation: Stabilise, Normalise, Exit Aboriginal Australia*, ed. Jon Altman & Melinda Hinkson (North Carlton, Victoria: Arena, 2007): 32. Sanderson is an ex-Governor of Western Australia, currently its government Special Adviser on Indigenous Affairs, and a high-ranking career soldier.

The nation's failure to come to terms with the responsibilities of its inheritance of an entire continent has resulted in the lack of respect for and abuse of the original peoples and their cultures. *This failure is not only reflected in the dysfunctional circumstances of many Aboriginal communities, but is also evidenced in the severely stressed state of the continent's unique ecology [...].* Indeed, it is difficult to see how we can survive if we do not find some way of being drawn back and reconnecting with the country. Unfortunately, the current strategy, if there is one, shows all the signs of remaining that of assimilation: the widely held view that the only hope for Indigenous people is to become like 'us' in the Australian mainstream, living in urban concentrations, having a job, having debt and equity, and joining the market on these terms.<sup>80</sup>

### **Cultural Diversity and Difference**

Aileen Moreton-Robinson sees the danger of Indigenous containment by the mainstream lurking in unsuspected corners. She takes issue with Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs's argument that Australian society became thoroughly postcolonial in the 1990s because of the new Native title legislation and the role Indigenous sacred sites play in establishing entitlement to country.<sup>81</sup>

What they fail to acknowledge is that the majority of Indigenous people in Australia do not have land-rights nor do they have legal ownership of their sacred sites. This representation of postcolonial Australia offers the symbolic appropriation of the sacred as a way that white Australia can seek to achieve the unattainable imperative of becoming Indigenous in order to erase its unbelonging [...]. This is a

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<sup>80</sup> Sanderson, "Reconciliation and the Failure of Neo-Liberal Globalisation," 34 (my emphasis).

<sup>81</sup> Gelder & Jacobs, *Uncanny Australia*.

problematic view of postcolonialism for it rests on the premise that the Indigenous population and white Australia have equal access to symbolic and material power.<sup>82</sup>

No doubt Gelder and Jacobs mean to present a critical instance of Indigene-friendly scholarship against the reactionary mainstream hysteria generated by Native title legislation, which placed fear before facts. However, after two decades of conservative backlash their study may feel infelicitously based on wishful thinking that runs the risk of reappropriating Indigeneity for self-serving purposes; the desire to understand and respect cultural difference threatens to reveal itself as an Aboriginalist assimilation of otherness by glossing over the material conditions that underlie unequal access to power and resources. It is thus that the historian Henry Reynolds lamented, only three years after the publication of *Uncanny Australia*:

What will have been achieved [a decade after Mabo]? A handful of cases where native title has been affirmed in the courts; some agreements outside them; a few land-use agreements and negotiated contracts between native title holders. Their significance should not be underestimated. But it is so much less than what many people hoped for and expected in those heady days in June 1992.<sup>83</sup>

Henry Reynolds's disillusion after that 'intoxicating' month is noteworthy, as his extensive work on Indigenous land rights through the rewriting of Australian history has been influential in furthering the Indigenous Australian cause. Notably, the High Court took his research on *terra nullius* as the paradigm that would allow for the incorporation of Native title into Australian Common Law.

Marcia Langton echoes Moreton-Robinson's concerns about mainstream involvement in Indigenous affairs. She takes issue with progressive attitudes toward Indigeneity and places leftist settler

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<sup>82</sup> Moreton-Robinson, "I Still Call Australia Home," 29–30. John Sanderson mentions that "only about 20% of Indigenous people now live on the land that is the source of their Dreaming and spiritual well-being" ("Reconciliation," 35).

<sup>83</sup> Henry Reynolds, *The Law of the Land* (1987; Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin Australia, 2003): 246.

discourse within the engrained racism that permeates mainstream Australian society as a whole, grounded in Enlightenment ideas of the Aborigine as savage, primitive, and positioned “on the edge of civilisation.”

Several experiences have prompted my dissatisfaction with the left stance towards Aboriginal people. First, I have experienced the racism that casts Aborigines as eternal mendicants of the state. Secondly, I have observed the empirical vacuum of the left on Aboriginal situations: textual knowledge cannot replace first-hand experience. A third contingent problem is the Left’s shallow understanding of Australian history and its consequences for Aboriginal people, which produces a distorted account of what self-determination, reconciliation, justice and restitution might mean for Aboriginal people. Most of all, the Left refuses to understand that there is an Aboriginal jurisdiction, that Aboriginal society has its own hierarchies, and that people like myself have status that in no way derives from Australian society but from my Aboriginal cultural inheritance.<sup>84</sup>

Thus, Langton shows herself to be profoundly skeptical about the possibility of the Australian mainstream engaging productively with cultural difference.

These critical comments from renowned Indigenous scholars throw serious doubt on the work with Indigeneity that can be done by non-Indigenes, to whom I as the author of this study belong. However, while only able partially—if at all—to understand the epistemological depth of the Indigenous-Australian universe, one should still maintain openness to difference and respect other voices in a world where discrete cultural spaces have become a chimera. In a globalizing world, we are obliged to meet and get along across

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<sup>84</sup> Marcia Langton, “Senses of Place: Fourth Overland lecture 2001,” *Overland* (Autumn 2002): 75–76. Langton holds the Foundation Chair in Australian Indigenous Studies in the center for Health and Society, Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences at the University of Melbourne. She is also the chairperson of the Cape York Institute for Leadership and Policy, in which Noel Pearson is active.

cultural rifts of varying degrees of incommensurability in order to create suitable conditions for coexistence, whether we like it or not. Almost two decades ago, Noel Pearson's view of Reconciliation laid out this uncanny predicament neatly:

I believe that the only choice available to both indigenous and non-indigenous Australians is to find a way of living together in a unified community which respects our particular and different identities and the particular rights of indigenous people. Because, as I often say to the occasional discomfort of both black and white people, Mabo has put to rest two gross fantasies. Firstly it has put to rest the fantasy that the blacks were not and are still not here. The fantasy of terra and homo nullius. Secondly, Mabo also puts to rest the fantasy that the whites are somehow going to pack up and leave. Co-existence remains our lot.<sup>85</sup>

Pearson concludes that the Native title legislation is the only key to lasting peace and reconciliation, and that denying this right to country, and thus to self-determination and self-government, is equivalent to alienating the Indigenous population.<sup>86</sup>

The relationship between contemporary mainstream politics and Indigenous affairs is undoubtedly complex and contradictory, with victim and victimizer positions disturbingly circulating through each other. Noel Pearson is an Indigenous leader and lawyer with a long-standing commitment to the Indigenous Australian cause. He played a crucial and controversial role in the justification of the Howard Government's intervention in Northern Territory affairs. His positioning on the federal takeover, the result of long years of personal involvement in economic development projects for remote NT Indigenous communities commissioned through the Cape York Institute for Leadership and Policy, has been criticized by a substantial number of Indigenous spokespeople for its deceptive veneer of neoliberal aspiration.<sup>87</sup> Indeed, John Howard reacted to

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<sup>85</sup> Quoted in Langton, "Senses of Place," 76.

<sup>86</sup> Quoted in Langton, "Senses of Place," 76.

<sup>87</sup> Altman, "In the Name of the Market?" 309–311. See below for quotation.

Pearson's urgent appeal for immediate government action after the publication of the *Little Children Are Sacred* report, and the Prime Minister consulted him rather than local Indigenous leaders before signing the go-ahead for the intervention.<sup>88</sup> Raimond Gaita makes this clear:

Noel Pearson insisted that the urgent need to protect children should silence [...] fears [of action that is as ill thought through as it is dramatic]. He did it with such passion and moral authority that he won the day. It could not have happened without Pearson: not the intervention itself, nor the broad consent to it.<sup>89</sup>

Jon Altman, an expert in Indigenous economic development and policy at the Australian National University in Canberra, sees Pearson as an astute player at the Indigenous/non-Indigenous cultural interface, capable of marketing new policies and practices for Australia's 'Fourth World', by drawing on the mainstream's increasing awareness of "past failure" and "neglect" in Indigenous policy as well as the responsibility Indigenous people have for their own marginalization:

Pearson's central term 'real economy', carefully undefined, is code for the free market [...] Similarly, his notion of 'welfare poison' [...] appealed to neoconservative think tanks [...] Pearson's views on land reform [...] contributed to a debate on home ownership and the moral hazard of group or communal land ownership.

In his favor, however, Altman points out that the implementation of Pearson's ideas in the Northern Territory through Cape York Institute programs differs markedly from their neoliberal interpretation and application by the Howard Government. He praises Pearson's political instinct, as it is his "bold vision," which "he has marketed astutely within polity and political circles," that may

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<sup>88</sup> Guy Rundle, "Military Humanitarianism in Australia's North," 37, 43–45.

<sup>89</sup> Gaita, "The Moral Force of Reconciliation," 297.

ultimately “make a real difference in the Cape.”<sup>90</sup> Thus, Marcia Langton has spoken of

neo-conservatives steal[ing] Pearson’s ideas on personal responsibility and impos[ing] punitive measures on entire populations trapped in alcohol and substance dependency, depriv[ing] them of economic capability and subject[ing] them to a miserable, violence ridden existence on the margins.<sup>91</sup>

Langton, an Indigenous Elder and experienced spokeswoman, is the Cape York Institute’s chairperson as well as an academic heavyweight in Aboriginal Studies. She defended Noel Pearson’s position in the Intervention and gave conditional support to the Howard government’s decision to interfere in NT affairs.

Langton brings traditional class and gender dichotomies into play when judging dissident Indigenous positions in the Intervention matter, blaming urban Indigenous critics for not understanding the remote communities’ living conditions. In her analysis, it is the “sustained fantas[y] about traditional Aboriginal society [...] that, until colonization, life for Aboriginal people was peaceful and idyllic,” which puts the blame on mainstream social policy for the existence of violence in remote communities (154). She also takes issue with the “virility” cult among Aboriginal men and their leaders for refusing to accept the urgent need for radical measures against child, domestic, and sexual violence in remote Indigenous communities, and for clinging stubbornly to a male-centered discourse of rights and self-determination; it is “the powerful, wrong-headed Aboriginal male ideology that has prevailed in Indigenous policy affairs” which refuses mainstream meddling in Indigenous affairs (146). Although she paints the radical character of government intervention as an “exasperated solution,” Langton acknowledges that it is a reaction to “the relationship between passivity, alcohol, substance abuse, and declining social norms” caused by loss of work opportunities, forced

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<sup>90</sup> Altman, “In the Name of the Market?” 309–311.

<sup>91</sup> Langton, “Trapped in the Aboriginal reality show,” 156. Further page references are in the main text.



migration, welfare dependency, and unlimited access to alcohol, drugs, and pornography despite the acquisition of citizenship rights in 1967 (152, 159).

Langton's challenging conclusions are harsh and dismissive on both sides of the Indigenous/non-Indigenous divide, and focus graphically on the true, needy victims in the conflict—the Indigenous underclass desperately aspiring but not managing to improve its living conditions. She shows the Indigenous search for “relief from poverty and economic exclusion” to be caught up in a rhetoric of reconciliation and justice informed by the History and Culture Wars, which address the key mainstream issue of whether “a settler nation [can] be honourable,” and “history be recruited to the cause of Australian nationalism without reaching agreement with its first peoples.” She takes issue with urban Indigenous spokesmen:

Political characters played by ‘Aboriginal leaders’ pull the levers that draw settler Australians to them in a co-dependent relationship. The rhetoric of reconciliation is a powerful drawcard [...]. It almost allows ‘the native’ some agency and a future [...]. The debate that has surrounded the Emergency Intervention has been instructive. It has exposed this co-dependency. It has also revealed a more disturbing, less well-understood fault-line in the Aboriginal world. The co-dependents in the relationship seek to speak for the abused, the suffering, the ill, the dying and those desperately in need who have been left alone to descend into a living hell while those far removed conduct a discourse on rights and culture. The bodies that have piled up over the last thirty years have become irrelevant, except where they serve the purposes of the ‘culture war’. (161–162)

From the vantage point of local involvement, both Langton and Pearson assign blame within as well as beyond Indigenous society for the marginalization, dysfunctionality, destruction, and poverty that affect the Indigenous Australian community, and urge responsible behavior on all fronts, beyond traditional victim and victimizer positions and race, class, and gender divisions, in overcoming these ills. In their vision, this entails looking into alleviating the pressing basic problems and needs of the ‘real’ Indigenous underclass as a

first step to the recovery and self-determination of the Indigenous community at large. In short, this means providing the Indigenous community with the basic rights and services that full citizenship implies for the average Australian—and not yet for the middling Aborigine despite the symbolic achievement of the 1967 referendum on census inclusion.<sup>92</sup>

Yet, ‘pragmatic’ heavyweight Indigenous authorities like Langton and Pearson are also the butt of criticism from those who refuse to ‘play ball’ with the mainstream and favor a hardcore approach to Constitutional recognition, political representation, and self-determination. The latter seek a shift toward First Nation primacy and sovereignty in redefining the Indigene–settler relationship and incorporating care for country and the fight against climate change as the best foundation for coexistence. In a 2018 essay,<sup>93</sup> the Indigenous

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<sup>92</sup> Rosemary Neill’s *White Out: How Politics Is Killing Black Australia* (Crow’s Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2002) offers an independent analysis of the worsening living conditions for many Indigenous communities as of the 1967 Referendum, and blames general denial of the problems underlying community dysfunction, the gap between the neoliberal imposition of assimilative policies, and the “political correctness” of the progressive mainstream’s non-intervention, as well as the often deficient management of affairs within the Indigenous community itself for the vicious circle of welfare dependency, structural unemployment, substance abuse, domestic and sexual violence, suicide, death, and general short life expectancy among Aborigines in both urban and remote regional areas. She concludes that community self-determination and self-management are necessary but not sufficient conditions for improving many Aborigines’ dire living conditions, and that they should be accompanied by appropriate mechanisms of program design, funding, and Indigenous accountability to create an independent economic base for community sustenance. She also highlights the importance of treaties between Federal governments and indigenous nations abroad in order to carry out this agenda. Neill’s analysis of Indigenous politics as well as of first settlement reads perfectly into the NT events five years later, and is in line with Langton and Pearson’s analysis and defense of the NT Intervention. Rosemary Neill is a journalist who “has worked for the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Bulletin*, the *London Financial Times* and the *Guardian*, and is currently an opinion columnist with the *Australian*. In 1994, she won a Walkley Award for her reporting of indigenous family violence” (Neill, *White Out*, bio note).

<sup>93</sup> Tony Birch, “‘On what terms can we speak?’ Refusal, resurgence and climate justice,” *Coolabah* 24–25 (2018): 2–16, <http://revistes.ub.edu/index.php/coolabah/article/view/22069> (accessed 1 June 2018).

novelist and academic Tony Birch provided a persuasive analysis of the structural inability of settler society to engage with Indigenous Constitutional recognition and political representation beyond the symbolic, a failure which he sees as perpetuating the exploitative colonial relationship of old. Birch highlights the conservative agenda informing the Commonwealth Recognise campaign that was the fruit of PM Tony Abbott's 2015 initiative, inherited from John Howard, to prepare Australia for a referendum on Indigenous inclusion in the Constitution. Birch draws attention to the increasing Indigenous resistance to inclusion in the founding document of the settler state when practical measures to improve the lives of Indigenous people continue to be structurally lacking. In this regard, Birch cites the theatre director Rachel Maza, who denounces more than two centuries of land theft and the settlers' failure to respect and respond in kind to Indigenous hospitality with the following homely simile:

I liken the Recognise campaign and the push to make mention of Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander people in the constitution to the scenario of someone moving into your house, taking over, and kicking you out into the yard in the shed. After many years, maybe even several generations, they come out to the yard holding the contract that states their rights to the house that was once yours, and suggest that it's only fair to include a sentence that says: 'We acknowledge that you once lived there. There you go! Now you're recognised,' they say, and they go back into your house and you go back to the shed.<sup>94</sup>

Birch makes vital connections between Indigenous sovereignty as never having been relinquished, the refusal of Constitutional recognition, and the fight to preserve the land in the face of neocolonialism and man-induced climate change to promote Indigenous ways of managing the land and the future of all

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<sup>94</sup> Birch, "On what terms can we speak?," 4, quoted in S. Kelly, "The Uluru Statement from the Heart: In the Words of Indigenous Australians," *The Monthly* (29 May 2017), <https://www.themonthly.com.au/today/sean-kelly/2017/29/2017/1496039300/uluru-statement-heart>. Further page references to Birch are in the main text.

Australians on viable terms. He points out how older, 'established' Indigenous spokespersons such as Warren Mundine, Marcia Langton, and Noel Pearson—the latter a member of the mixed Referendum Council leading the Recognise campaign—are in fact co-opted by the 'economic realities' of the settler Australians' neoliberal market philosophy when they criticize Green initiatives against mining and other commercial projects on tribal land (3). Concurring with young Indigenous environmentalist activists who refuse recognition and promote a full notion of sovereignty, Birch sees the Recognition campaign as deceptive, assimilative 'sleight of hand'—a "white political construct" of symbolic content that serves only to curtail the Indigenous people's right to recognition, representation, and sovereignty, leading back to the destructive capitalist exploitation of resources (6).

The Recognise campaign addressed both Indigenous and settler communities and culminated in the Uluru Statement from the Heart in June 2017, which proposed a watered-down form of Constitutional recognition that limited Indigenous parliamentary representation and the content of a possible treaty (6). Significantly, this was later criticized by Noel Pearson himself as the Referendum initiative lost political impetus (5). Birch points out that Pearson's greatest flaw in taking a leading role in the initiative was to presuppose the existence of an oxymoronic "radical centre" of goodwill in Australian politics that would allow the Indigenous population to prosper on their own terms. As Birch explains, such a center is never "benign" but masks its structural debt to the status quo with actions of symbolic lip service rather than with effective change (5–6). The refusal of Turnbull and other conservative ministers to engage with even so little as the "soft" version of recognition proposed in the Uluru Statement appears to prove Birch's point (5). At bottom, Birch's article argues that the urgent need to protect and manage country from a holistic, ontological Indigenous perspective calls for a profound redefinition of Indigenous and settler relationships that is non-assimilative. Citing North-American First Nations scholars, he formulates strategies to open up the debate and achieve effective collaboration between the Indigenous and settler population to guarantee the survival of all, human and non-human:

we need to address the concept of justice and reparations within Australia, commencing with developing equitable and respectful relationships between Indigenous people and non-Indigenous Australia. The protection of country will become a precarious venture if we do not do this [...] “the land must again become the pedagogy” (Simpson, 2014, p. 14, original italics). For Simpson, as with Coulthard, the recognition of land itself as our teacher is a key stepping-stone towards Indigenous resurgence. (9)

### **Australianness and Europeanness**

In the face of these complexities, how can I position my research? Concerned with the role of the cultural other in the process of identity formation, it addresses reconfigurations of Australianness through its exposure to Indigeneity and its manifold and varied inscriptions in the literary domain, but in the final analysis it cannot pretend to ‘reveal’ or define what Indigeneity is—although I may have come closer to my Self. As the work of an ‘uninitiated’ person, a guest on foreign territory, it must simply bow to Indigenous Australian sovereignty, the inalienable right of self-definition, and avoid any attempt at absorbing cultural difference into a Western framework—rather, this framework should listen and adapt to cultural difference. The Enlightenment discourse of spiritual and material progress that inspired the colonial enterprise and drew on the latter to reinforce, fix, and impose Europe’s presumed superiority must consequently be refused.

Chapter 1 pointed out how Freud investigated the uncanny through his theorization of the Oedipus complex, the incest taboo, and sexual sublimation in the establishment of culture and civilization. His analysis, however, proves disturbingly pivoted on a biased, tendentious interpretation of Indigenous Australian societies and is therefore incomplete and faulty—particularly Morgan’s and Scott’s fictions subvert the idea that the sublimation of the incest wish in the nuclear family has taken Western civilization to the summit of human development. In light of the epistemological complexities posed by our exposure to the incommensurable worldviews of the (Indigenous) Other, the only way to achieve

politically viable speaking positions lies in recognizing that Indigenous re/configurations of identity lay bare the always tenuous, processual nature of our self-definition, as it disappears into the blurring mirror image of that Other. As my discussion has aimed to highlight, such blurring of the 'authentic' and the 'original' in the racial/ethnic realm automatically spills over into other, related discursive fields, and undoes discrete gender and class categories as well. By way of example, my experience with gender, masculinity, gay and lesbian studies in the 1980s taught me that nothing can be said about homosexuality as a discrete essence: rather, it performs in manifold, unpredictable ways, and it stands to reason that the case for Indigeneity is, at heart, no different.

What the white Australian mainstream can do to truly postcolonize remains a vexed issue; traditional Australianness markets a class egalitarianism inscribed in the presumed sublimation of a colonial past of metropolitan rejection, but this configuration is troubled by issues of gender and particularly of race. If the mainstream is to come to a reckoning with a discomfiting past of violent invasion and land-grabbing—by rejecting the Enlightenment notion of 'benign settlement'—and to build a common future with the First Australians from an Indigenous paradigm of understanding (the) country, it must certainly reach beyond the symbolic thrust of Kevin Rudd's Sorry speech and Tony Abbott's and Malcolm Turnbull's Recognise campaign. Much needed as such gestures are in the process of 'healing the nation,' they only acquire true meaning provided they translate into the practical and material and thus respond to what Marcia Langton characterizes as the Indigenous endeavor to "simply seek[-] relief from poverty and economic exclusion."<sup>95</sup> As many Indigenous theorists and writers indicate, in such a framework the Indigenous right to self-definition, self-determination, and self-government should figure prominently to create effective and productive policies against the vast array of inequalities that still separate Indigenous from mainstream Australia. It is only in the active provision of basic citizenship rights for Indigenous Australians—access to Indigenous land and its resources, political power, wealth, health, education, employment etc.—that

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<sup>95</sup> Langton, "Trapped in the Aboriginal reality show," 161.

reconciliation and justice can be sought and found. In the face of the ongoing state of assimilatory siege waged upon Indigenous communities, emblematically evidenced in the Northern Territory Intervention but also the recent Recognise campaign, it remains to be seen whether such an emancipatory Indigenous agenda may eventually obtain in mainstream politics.

If historical memory, expressing regret, managing trauma, and building a shared future beyond the racial divide are such sensitive issues for white Australians, how, then, can we expect their next of kin, the Europeans, to deal effectively with the disquieting uncertainties provoked by a globalizing world of mass migration, national dissolution, and economic dislocation? The Australian case shows that raising defensive battlements around Europeanness—or, worse, around individual nationalities—in order to restrict access to power and resources to an already-privileged local majority population is not a viable solution. Rather, such regressive essentialism and lack of hospitality is exclusionary as well as a perverse, cynical denial of cultural difference and common humanity as *Weltbürgerschaft* which gestures back to the notion of European supremacy that accompanied our colonial history of intercontinental aggression and usurpation. Thus, it refuses shelter to those people who have been stripped of their means of survival and resources by the impact of neocolonial market forces on other continents—forces that replicate Europe's colonial expansion and migration of earlier centuries and that brought devastation to so many indigenous societies abroad.

As in Australia, it appears that in Europe a process of mainstream acknowledgement of, reconciliation with, and compensation for the continuing impact of its colonial heritage is due, in defiance of attitudes and processes that enthrone the market as the determiner of the West's moral economy and define human relations in terms of capitalist commodification. Such a moral and material reckoning or 'pay-back'<sup>96</sup> can never be based on a binary agenda of

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<sup>96</sup> In Aboriginal Australia, pay-back refers to a ritualized form of revenge, in which the offended part obtains the right to hurt the offender. After the ceremony is carried out peace is automatically restored. Obviously, by transferring this concept to the current multicultural European context, my intention is to

assimilation/exclusion of postcolonial subjects. The Australian mainstream critic and editor John Hinkson argues that “societies, over generations, can come to terms with their limitations,” but only if they learn to perceive, understand, and respect cultural difference as well as shared humanity with the other. He believes this mindset was at work in the period leading up to, and in the wake of, the Mabo decision:

Recognising the insults and untruths surrounding the doctrine of terra nullius was a crucial achievement, as was the acceptance, if grudging, of Indigenous’ people’s demands for forms of autonomy that offered them the opportunity to come to terms with their own social development after the flood of white culture.<sup>97</sup>

While hard-boiled essentialist approaches to identity are doomed to fail, a strict imposition of cultural relativism will fare no better. It appears that blind engagement with either essentialism or cultural relativism in identity debates offers no way out of the complexities involved in identity politics, but may be found in strategic, non-exclusionary joint applications of both approaches to tackle problems of ‘authenticity’, ‘originality’, and entitlement to group membership, together with its rights *and* obligations. The Australian case suggests that disempowered minorities need, as the very minimum, a strategic politics of the body so as to further their political objectives—be it in race, class, and/or gender terms—while empowered majorities need to question exclusionary epistemological paradigms and open themselves to cultural difference in order to make cohabitation in cultural and physical (nation) spaces possible. For Indigenous Australians, such a strategic performance of difference would not be at odds with Moreton-Robinson’s theorization of the ontological Indigenous relationship with land as ‘country’, but would simply respond to the need for Indigeneity to embody in mainstream

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highlight that material/monetary compensation is due to disenfranchised minorities for the impact of the (neo)colonial enterprise.

<sup>97</sup> John Hinkson, “The ‘Innocence’ of the Settler Imagination,” in *Coercive Reconciliation: Stabilise, Normalise, Exit Aboriginal Australia*, ed. Jon Altman & Melinda Hinkson (North Carlton, Melbourne: Arena, 2007): 288.



contexts. While identity relies on performance for cultural transmission as well as for the dynamics of adaptation, temporary closures occur for strategic reasons in the process of empowering minority groups, although these may be perceived as irreducible, atemporal essence by insiders and outsiders alike. Contradictorily, the uncanny manifestation of incommensurable difference in/on the Indigenous corpus could be read as the necessary condition by which the realignment of identity is facilitated; such closure is, as Alexis Wright holds, needed in order “to give us a chance to change.”<sup>98</sup>

This process of closure has negatively affected culturally defined ‘Aborigines’ such as the authors and activists Mudrooroo and Roberta Sykes, and the author Archie Weller.<sup>99</sup> While they make a claim to Indigenous lived experience through discrimination based on shared skin color as an important factor in past identity constitution and political engagement, nowadays they may not be able to employ Indigeneity any longer to these purposes, as the discourse on Indigeneity has become less existentialist and refuses what is considered a white lie—a skin-deep definition of Indigenous identity. Disturbingly, in the Australian context Indigenous Black is always black, but black is not necessarily Black, though it may give rise to active solidarity, as is manifest in Mudrooroo’s and Roberta Sykes’ histories of political engagement.<sup>100</sup> The uncanny quality of

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<sup>98</sup> Ravenscroft, “Politics of Exposure,” 80.

<sup>99</sup> See Chapter 3.

<sup>100</sup> Regarding Sykes’ autobiographical trilogy *Snake Dreaming* (1997–2000), which depicts the intimate links between the personal and the public in Sykes’ intense participation in black politics in Australia, Alexis Wright stresses that “Sykes explores the depth of the personal veneer surrounding every Australian who is, like it or not, part of the hidden history of black and white contact in this country. Secrets taken to the grave choke up every cemetery in Australia. A genuine national pride must also accept and accommodate the shame. Sykes’ intricate and courageously honest story of her life may help us to understand why this needs to be so” (quoted from the back cover of *Snake Dancing*, part two of the trilogy, Allen & Unwin, 1998; from a review originally published in the *Australian Book Review*). Wright refers to Sykes’ problems to uncover the truth about her father’s origins, which her white mother refused to reveal to her. The latter’s public statement that he was African American rather than Aboriginal may have been a white lie to ward off negative consequences for herself and her dark-skinned children in the assimilation era. Roberta ostensibly remained puzzled by her origins and wrote

these black authors' identitarian unfixeness draws attention to the tenuous nature of identity formation, a process always in flux and never at rest, performing on an ever-changing discursive continuum that may nevertheless suggest and even require momentary stillness and opaqueness. This is not to reject Aileen Moreton-Robinson's postulate of an ontological relationship between the Indigenous Australian and country; rather, my contention is that such an ontological bind is beyond the vagaries of either relativism or essentialism, allowing leveling inscriptions of identity in race, class, and gender terms through local connections to country over thousands of generations.

From a non-Indigenous point of view, Indigenous scholars' and novelists' refusal to engage with Western schemes of interpretation in processes of constituting Indigeneity may be read as an impenetrable yet temporary closure of identity, and this leads to the unsettling notion that mainstream observers can(not) understand what it means to be Indigenous Australian: although we may open up to the Other, we can never fully meet. Spiritually, we may perceive Indigeneity—as given shape through the epistemology of the Indigenous sacred in Aboriginal Reality—as an uncanny manifestation of unfathomable cultural difference; yet rationally we may also see it as a canny manifesto of a wholesome, communal, and leveling inscription of human identity in the land, committed to respecting and caring for all life that country generates and sustains. This uncanny interface of partially commensurable, partially incommensurable difference allows us superficial readings of Indigeneity but rejects any attempt to plumb the ontological nature of Indigeneity unless and until—if ever—we are duly initiated into the spirituality with which the land is imbued by its Indigenous guardians. And perhaps this is the most important but contradictory Antipodean lesson we may take home: in order to truly understand cultural difference we should accept its irreducibility to Western

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that "[her mother's] answers were so complex, rooted in the racism of this country and my mother's desire to escape from the harshness and poverty of her upbringing." See Roberta Sykes, *Snake Circle* (St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2000): 111.

schemes of interpretation and operation—Indigeneity is like the proverbial black swan to us.

This unsettling truth does not necessarily translate into fatal incomprehension and impossible coexistence, as long as we are willing to respect and learn from our differences. As the Ghana-born African American philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah optimistically puts it, “we don’t have to agree on our values and identities to live in harmony, as long as we agree to make living together work.”<sup>101</sup> Within the Australian framework, Noel Pearson’s grim observation that neither settler nor Indigenous Australians are going to disappear and that therefore “co-existence remains our lot”<sup>102</sup> speaks to both groups’ obligation to participate actively in the process of making coexistence possible, but also reminds us of the special effort required of non-Indigenes in order to achieve this. Thus, Kim Scott holds that, in the current socio-political and legal constellation, inclusionary forms of Australianness can be generated from within Indigeneity but not from within the mainstream,<sup>103</sup> which chimes with Tony Bird’s conceptualization of Indigeneity.

As many Australians lack direct contact with Indigenous communities and with the true nature of their entrenched difficulties to survive and thrive, alternative means of crosscultural contact have to be sought. Granting Marcia Langton’s observation that first-hand experience is always better than books, one possible way of listening to, learning from, and respecting Indigenous Australia is through exposure to Indigenous texts that manifest the imprint of Indigenous reality; the important literary awards made to Kim Scott and Alexis Wright’s fiction signal that mainstream Australian readership is opening up to what Indigenous authors have to say about their world, their Indigenous reality. It goes without saying that Indigenous literature has an important role to play in voicing and teaching about cultural difference, in creating the ground for respectful coexistence, and thus in working toward a truly postcolonized Australia—not only politically and economically but

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<sup>101</sup> Quoted in Ien Ang, “Passengers on Train Australia,” *Griffith Review* 19 (Autumn 2008): 230.

<sup>102</sup> Quoted in Langton, “Senses of Place,” 76.

<sup>103</sup> Scott & Brown, *Kayang and Me*, 207.

also psychologically. No doubt these observations can be extended to the larger scope of Western society and minority discourses in general.

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