



UNIVERSITAT DE
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From Lifewriting to Postcolonising Dreaming Narrative

Uncanny Articulations of Race, Class and Gender
in the Indigenous Australian Corpus

Cornelis Martin Renes



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Uncanny Articulations of Race, Class and Gender in the Indigenous Australian Corpus

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Chapter 1

Introducing the Uncanny: Europe's Antipodean Mirror

“Aboriginal corporeality—the embodied being of Aborigines—remains a troubling and disturbing fact for settler Australia”

(Philip Morrissey 2007: 65)

1.1. Introduction

This dissertation and its prequel, my minor thesis, have their seeds in a concern with a certain uncanniness embedded in multicultural developments in Western society. In his 1919 essay “The Uncanny”, Freud explains the uncanny as a special quality of feeling: it is a frightening, disquieting strangeness, rooted in the familiar becoming strange. A century after the publication of Freud’s essay,¹ this feeling of estrangement from a known and secure world has become a universal feature of the postmodern West, and locks in with profound changes in Western society felt to be beyond individual and communal control. I am specifically interested in tracing how the uncanny is activated in contemporary issues of race and ethnicity, how it dislocates the Euro-centrism of our identity, and how it signals towards identity’s redefinition along the parameters of race, gender and class through articulation and performance.

As I will point out in chapter 2, the uncanny is a liminal concept which blurs cohesive (self)-definitions. It is therefore at the postcolonial margins that the values of the metropolitan centre are most successfully interrogated and—to paraphrase a seminal title in English postcolonial literature studies²—written back to. This is so because 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”.³ Grand narrative is founded on the fiction of European modernity: the universalist claim on the world’s perfect knowability through

¹ See chapter 2 for a detailed discussion.

² Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. (1989). *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. London and New York: Routledge. A second, rewritten edition of this study was published in 2002.

³ Lyotard 1984: xxiii-iv.

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 Edward Said says, “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.”⁴ *Postmodernity*, however, shows itself precisely in “incredulity towards metanarratives”⁵ and questions the Euro-centred worldview the latter can be understood to obscure and support.

I have chosen to take an Antipodean instance of Western postcolonial margins as the point of departure for my investigation, since it is at the tense black-and-white interface of the so-called settler nations that the uncanny most forcefully obtains. Australia, New Zealand and South Africa are known as the Antipodean settler nations—postcolonial nations that have been politically controlled by settlers from the old Imperial Centre and built on a White self-definition.⁶ The case of Australia is especially instructive in terms of the appearance of the uncanny because of its troubled relationship with its Indigenous communities, nowadays largely articulated through the official policy of multiculturalism. Regarding multiculturalism, the *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Politics* states:

The term ‘multiculturalism’ emerged in the 1960s in Anglophone countries in relation to the cultural needs of non-European migrants. It now means the political accommodation by the state and/or a dominant group of all minority cultures defined first and foremost by reference to race or ethnicity; and more controversially, by reference to nationality, aboriginality, or religion, the latter being groups that tend to make larger claims and so tend to resist having their claims reduced to those of immigrants. The ethnic assertiveness associated with multiculturalism has been part of a wider current of ‘identity’ politics which has transformed the idea of equality as sameness to equality as difference. Black power, feminist, and gay pride movements challenged the ideal of equality as

⁴ Said 1995: 7.

⁵ Lyotard 1984: xxiv.

⁶ My research is not concerned with the postcolonial literatures arisen in the Antipodean European 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.

assimilation and contended that a positive self-definition of group difference was more liberatory. The rejection of the idea that political concepts such as equality and citizenship can be colour-blind and culture-neutral, the argument that ethnicity and culture cannot be confined to some so-called private sphere but shape political and opportunity structures in all societies, is one of the most fundamental claims made by multiculturalism and the politics of difference. It is the basis for the conclusion 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.⁷

This definition of multiculturalism links up with Homi Bhabha’s distinction between cultural diversity and cultural *difference*. As cultural difference may translate as 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 neutralise 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, administering a *consensus* based on a norm that propagates cultural diversity.”⁸ 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 Euro-centred self-definition is indicative of how we need to refocus our management of postmodern identity predicaments on the private and public level. I will concentrate on postcolonial Australian *literature* to argue the latter point, since a sense of national, group and individual identity is foremost established through *narrative*, as the Tasmanian-based scholar Lucy Frost has pointed out.⁹

⁷ Modood. 2003.

⁸ Rutherford 1990: 207-9.

⁹ Frost 1997.

In order to establish how the definition of Australianness has become shifty, the term postcolonial deserves special attention. Australia is, in fact, an odd member of the postcolonial margins and has had an ambiguous, troubled relationship with its still-extant metropolitan centre, Britain, as well as its own oppressed peoples, the Aborigines. How colonised has Australia been as a society, and how colonising? In a discussion of *The Empire Writes Back* (1989),¹⁰ Ella Shohat argues that:

[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 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 Aborigines 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.¹¹

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 colonised by the British Metropole. However, if we use ‘The West’ in its widest sense, as all those societies that take European origins—political, historical,

¹⁰ Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1989.

¹¹ Shohat 1992: 102-3.

economic, cultural and that politically-incorrect notion: biological—as their main referent, these white-settler colonies must be included as agents in neo-colonialist policies at home and abroad. In fact, the denomination white-settler nation straddles uneasily across notions of the coloniser and colonised, and the occurrence of the postcolonial uncanny can be located precisely in this ambiguity.

Therefore, the exact focus of my research is on the ‘margins within the not-so-very margins’: the literature produced by a minority group enjoying special status in the Australian multicultural firmament. These are the Indigenous Australians, the so-called Aborigines and Torres-Strait Islanders, whose prior (i.e. pre-colonial) presence and situatedness question mainstream claims upon the nation space. Their literary manifestations can be considered an apt tool in the articulation, authorisation and redefinition of Indigenous definitions of Australianness within the process of what I will call ‘postcolonising’ and ‘postmodernising’ Australia. How this leads to uncanny inscriptions of identity that question and blur rigid boundaries of race, class and gender I aim to analyse by discussing the work of four novelists who focus on a rewriting of the Australian physical, textual and identitarian landscape from an Indigenous point of view. My research topic aims to inscribe itself in the unresolved, uncanny tension between the need for effective political strategies of Native entitlement and the very dissolution of the racial, gender and class boundaries with which essentialist discourses fix Native and non-Native subjectivities alike.

1.2. Too Close for Comfort?

Having drawn attention to the postcolonial location of literature, some words are due to my own situatedness as a scholar. I write from the geographical and cultural location of Western Europe, which determines my interest in the structural links between the postmodern and postcolonial. In Western Europe, the strong development of the global economy and the continuing 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 baggage. While Western Europe was—ironically enough—the cradle of the colonial project that sent large segments of its population across the seas in previous centuries, the current migratory influx has raised a general concern that the Western-European continental fringe is no longer able to absorb newcomers 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 denaturalisation of European identity and values, and of a loss of privileges for the mainstream population. Particularly striking in this sense 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, a country once reputed to be tolerant and pioneering in social reform, is illustrative; it is also my homeland and thus paradigmatic for my own conception of ‘home’.

One of the most striking and uncanny developments in recent Dutch politics has been the virulent development of a populist and racist discourse against immigration. The advent of the new millennium saw the quick rise of a right-wing anti-immigration party centred on the histrionics and populism of politician Pim Fortuyn. His ideas found massive support in a considerable part of the working and lower-middle-class Dutch and—surprisingly—the more settled immigrant population who sought to defend their interests against newcomers. Indeed, this was a development that unsettled Dutch multiculturalism profoundly. Class, gender and ethnic intolerance had long been taboo areas in Dutch politics and against Fortuyn’s political incorrectness, Dutch politicians generally reacted with an attempt to silence this new rival. But when Fortuyn’s support quickly grew, most parties followed his initiative to curb immigration in an effort to cater for this unexpected change in attitude of mainstream Dutch society; Fortuyn had definitively put the ethnic issue on the map, and in racialist terms for that matter.

However, about to enter Parliament with a landslide victory, Fortuyn was shot just before the national elections of 2002 by a mentally-disturbed environmentalist of Dutch ancestry. Fortuyn’s assassination, rather than crushing his party’s prospects, boosted its forecasted results: it reached a 20% share in the polls, primarily amongst the less affluent, yet not so poor segments of Dutch society. What, in fact, disclosed itself in Dutch society through these events was a notion of the uncanny, or the familiar becoming strange. The Dutch pride themselves on a strong sense of peace and tolerance, of shared opportunities and prosperity, and on a multiculturalism *avant la lettre* inherited from the country’s 17th century period of affluence and rekindled by the 1960s’ economic boom. However, both the specifics of Fortuyn’s rise and demise shocked the country into the disturbing awareness that the traditional basis of its democracy had been torpedoed from the most unimaginable and unlikely front possible: precisely those formerly underprivileged

classes who had benefited from the welfare the Dutch state and economy had been able to create for its citizens. The icon of this uncanniness was, in fact, Fortuyn himself.

Fortuyn, a former communist, gay campaigner and textbook defender of the politically marginalized and weak, uncannily turned into a stronghold of traditional conservative values after coining the Pim Fortuyn Parliamentary Group (*Lijst Pim Fortuyn* or *LPF*). It was closely connected to local right-wing factions organized under the rather deceptive name *For a Livable Holland* (*Leefbaar Nederland*). He successfully appealed to large groups in Dutch society who felt their rights and privileges of old endangered and perceived themselves as a new marginalized ‘minority’, empowered therefore to rally against the positive discrimination policies geared towards the recently-arrived. Nevertheless, it was not an immigrant complot that stunted Fortuyn’s rise, but the single-handed action of a white campaigner for animal rights, whose reasons for the murder were never completely cleared up. Officially the assassin objected to Fortuyn’s unscrupulous use of Dutch Muslims as the scapegoat for multicultural tensions in order to gain political power, but perhaps the issue goes deeper.

As the proverbial wolf in sheep’s clothes—and it is tempting to speculate that Fortuyn’s murderer reacted to animal imagery on a subliminal level—Fortuyn was not what he appeared to be; drawing on a past of commitment with the underdog, he appealed to and convinced the Dutch lower middle classes with a programme of undemocratic and divisive tendencies that subverted the very idea of an empowered minority. Thus, the good fortune projected through his surname reached out to Dutch society in what could only be described as uncanny ways. Both the circumstances of his appearance and disappearance from the Dutch political scene were literally most ill-omened and unfortunate, symptomatic of the changing political climate in Western society after the Islam-fundamentalist attack on the Twin Towers in 2001 and representative of serious fissures in Dutch national identity.

While the racial component in Fortuyn’s assassination was partly put to rest by the white identity of the perpetrator and could only be tentatively related to homophobic attitudes, another assassination of a Dutchman of high public profile would put a closer spotlight on the structural links between ethnicity, class and gender. For some decades now, feminist sectors of Dutch society have been concerning themselves with the emancipation of women immigrants. The case for first-generation immigration is wrought with multiple difficulties, such as the need to learn the Dutch language, lack of adequate schooling and the persistence of traditional role patterns, but it is precisely

daughters rather than sons from immigrant families who have been integrating more easily into Dutch society, overcoming domestic limitations on gender. So when in 2004 a male Muslim fundamentalist of the Moroccan underclass murdered Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh because of a documentary entitled *Submission*, which criticises female oppression in Muslim countries,¹² issues of ethnicity, class and gender clearly linked up with each other.

This was all the more the case because the documentary's script had been written by a Somalian woman, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, who was forced to go into hiding and placed under police protection after Van Gogh's murder. She was a notable icon of ethnic women's liberation who had repeatedly denounced the subjugated position of women in Islam, the particulars of Dutch multiculturalism, and the unfairness of Dutch immigration policies regarding ill-qualified immigrants. This positioning became her springboard for a political career in progressive circles. However, she soon grew critical with the ways the multiculturalist programme of Dutch Labour (*PvdA*) 'subjugated' immigrant women, as ethnic tolerance had led to condoning male chauvinist attitudes amongst immigrants. She therefore started to move towards conservative, neo-liberal positions, in apparent contradiction with the purport of her political ideas, and became an MP for the liberal right-wing party *VVD* (*Volksverbond voor Vrijheid en Democratie* or 'People's Party for Freedom and Democracy') in 2003. In this change of allegiance, she uncannily emulated Pim Fortuyn's movements through the political spectrum: both became active within progressive factions through the gendered articulation of a minority discourse but uncannily ended up identifying with a conservative politics apparently at odds with their subject positions, perhaps only to be explained out of changing class allegiances.

But the disturbing similarities with the Fortuyn case do not stop here. Surprisingly, Ali's role on the Dutch political scene was thwarted by an outstanding member of her own party, Minister of Immigration Rita Verdonk. The latter, a controversial hardliner in immigration affairs, revoked Ali's Dutch citizenship in 2006 over reputed immigration irregularities, and thus forced her to resign her seat in Parliament. The loss of her Dutch nationality draws attention to the uncanny identity issue underpinning this act of political assassination which, in turn, echoes and profiles the issues of ethnicity, class and gender embedded in the silencing of Pim Fortuyn. Ayaan Hirsi Ali had already publicly

¹² Theo van Gogh, a relative of the famous Dutch impressionist painter, filmed and presented *Submission* in 2004. The documentary created an immediate controversy involving the Dutch Muslim population. *Submission* can be watched at *YouTube*: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aGtQvGGY4S4>.

confessed in 2002, before assuming a position of political power, that she had not been altogether truthful when claiming political refugee status in 1992. The irregularities in question were excusable minor offences. The first misdemeanour was a technicality: she had immigrated from Kenya after a long stay there, rather than from Somalia, but had pleaded for political refugee status regarding the latter country because it was easier to obtain. Nevertheless, she had been born in Somalia but left it for political reasons, while Kenya was only a phase in a longer process of expatriation.

The second misdemeanour was an issue that, although sensitive, the vast sway of Dutch feminism could easily sympathise with: she hid her true identity upon entrance in order to elude the marriage her father had arranged for her to a distant Canadian cousin.¹³ Ironically, the official position of Dutch Parliament on arranged marriage is one of rejection, and the then minister of Immigration was a *woman* who should have understood Ali's misgivings. All in all, several observers believe that Ali's downfall at the hands of her own parliamentary group was spurred by the fact that, as a controversial hardliner in Muslim emancipation matters, she did not fit into the Dutch model of consensus politics. Although Parliament and national and international public opinion forced Minister Verdonk to revoke her decision, Ali accepted an offer from the USA to join a neo-conservative think tank and left The Netherlands for good.¹⁴

Ayaan Hirshi Ali and Pim Fortuyn no longer occupy the Dutch political scene, but the sense of slow recovery to 'normality' that some observers perceived in Dutch society after their disappearance¹⁵ was quickly undone. Fortuyn and Ali's legacy uncannily resurfaced in Geert Wilders, a populist politician formerly active in the aforementioned liberal party *VVD*.¹⁶ Copying Fortuyn's strategy, in 2004 Wilders formed a one-man faction bearing the eponymous name *Groep Wilders* after his hardliner-assimilationist view on (non-Christian) immigrant integration had clashed with more moderate party views regarding the Islamic and the Turkish accession to the European Union. It appears

¹³ Apparently, her real name is Ali Hirsi Magan.

¹⁴ See, for instance, Lluís Basset's "La princesa blasfema" in the Spanish national newspaper *El País*, 18 May 2006, p. 12, and the editorial "Holanda y Hirsi Ali" in *El País*, 22 May 2006, p.16.

¹⁵ Peter Giessen discusses a survey on Dutch mentality in a newspaper article entitled "A country that slowly relaxes" (*Volkscrant* 23 June 2007). Its abstract states that "The Netherlands seemed to have recovered from the shock caused by Pim Fortuyn and the 11th of September. This, at least, is the conclusion of a survey looking into changes of attitude by the only institution that foresaw the 'civil revolt'. But we remain on our guard." Whereas in the public sphere the pressure on new immigration and the call for law and order has diminished somewhat, in the private sphere a sense of wariness prevails: "[e]xtreme experiences are out of fashion, a meaningful life and security are becoming fashionable" (my translation). The publication of Giessen's article coincided in the same newspaper and day with Duyvendak & Tonkens' article discussed below.

¹⁶ Traynor 2008.

that Wilders' harsh attack on Islam can be connected to his part-German ancestry: his father fled from German National Socialism to settle in the pre-War Netherlands. This has led Wilders to speculate about his possibly Jewish origins, and places his discourse in the uncanny crucible of a politics of racial exclusion that turns victims into victimisers. It is a curious coincidence with the object of this dissertation and important for the development of his political career that, due to financial problems when younger, he was unable to visit and explore his favourite travel destination, Australia. Instead, Wilders developed strong ties with Israel, where he has spent long periods since his twenties, and learnt to abhor the lack of democracy in the neighbouring Arab countries he so often visited.¹⁷

Favouring Euro-scepticism on anti-immigration grounds, Wilders became the cornerstone of the Dutch veto of the European Constitution in the 2005 referendum. His populist style, boosting facile, restrictive and exclusionary arguments on national and European identity is uncannily crafted on combining a fake Aryan appearance with a presumed libertarian attitude. Indeed, his carefully-bleached platinum-blond hair is at odds with his refusal to ally with notoriously fascist politicians such as Austria's ill-fated Jörg Haider and France's Jean-Marie Le Pen.¹⁸ As such, his style is indebted to Pim Fortuyn's histrionic charisma but also cuts across to Ayaan Hirshi Ali's confrontational conception of political activism with uncompromising opinions of Islam that have also earned him constant police protection and robbed him of a personal life. Emulating the case of *Submission*, Wilders wrote, commissioned and internationally promoted the short film *Fitna*¹⁹, which virulently attacks Islam, without any sensitivity towards its less radical and less dogmatic versions. Citing excerpts from the Qur'an within a context of media and newspaper clips, it shows and describes acts of violence and hatred committed by Muslims, aiming to demonstrate that followers of Islam are taught to reject and persecute non-believers. Wilders claims the film to be "a call to shake off the creeping tyranny of Islamization" by denouncing its supposed promotion of terrorism, antisemitism, violence against women and homosexuals, and Islamic universalism. Illustrative for his exclusionary politics, Wilders holds that "*Fitna* is the last warning to

¹⁷ Traufetter 2008.

¹⁸ Traynor 2008.

¹⁹ 'Fitna' is Arabic for 'division' or 'test of faith'. The film can be watched at *YouTube*: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BgQdZgojOFI>

the West. We can choose to pass freedom on to our children or allow our freedom to sink into a multicultural swamp.”²⁰

Fitna has been internationally condemned and has sparked off an international debate on the limits of freedom of speech,²¹ up to the point that the UK has declared Wilders persona non grata because of his hate-speech.²² His current international reputation of ethnic and religious intolerance notwithstanding, Wilders has managed to appeal to the settled, large Dutch middle classes and is forecast to become the country’s next Prime Minister. Authoritative surveys in March 2009 suggested his newly-coined Freedom Party (*Partij voor de Vrijheid*) would have won the elections with the support of a fifth of the Dutch electorate, had they been held then in this country with a highly plural parliamentary make-up traditionally functioning on the basis of consensus politics.²³ Indeed, in the European elections of June 2009, Wilders’ party managed to fetch 17% of the votes with an exclusionary agenda in terms of race, but not of gender. This was good for the second position in a neck-to-neck race with the traditional political centre represented by the Christian-Democrat *CDA* (20%), and it easily outdid the large moderate left and right-wing parties *PvdA* and *VVD*, which both had to settle for a meagre 12% of the votes on the final count.²⁴

Thus, the particulars of Pim Fortuyn’s death are disturbingly amplified by the assassination of Theo van Gogh, Ayaan Hirsi Ali’s banishment, and the current rise of their ‘hybrid offspring’ Geert Wilders, who considers himself their political heir.²⁵ These events exemplify the uncanny turmoil in which Dutch national identity finds itself, defining it as shifty 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 unrecognisably ‘strange’. In June 2007, a major national newspaper published an article by two university professors, Jan Willem Duyvendak and Evelien Tonkens, who hold the chair of Sociology and ‘Active Citizenship’ respectively at the University of Amsterdam. It assesses the general state of feeling surrounding the question of immigration in relation to ‘Dutchness’. In their analysis, significantly entitled “All of The Netherlands is

²⁰ Park, Michael 2008.

²¹ See Works Cited: “Holland declines to prosecute anti-Islam politician,” an anonymous report in *The International Herald Tribune* of 30 June 2008.

²² Steen, Michael 2009.

²³ Waterfield, Bruno 2009.

²⁴ See Works Cited: “Verkiezingen”, an anonymous report in the Dutch national newspaper *De Volkskrant*.

²⁵ Traynor 2008.

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 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 exclusive. 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.²⁶

Duyvendak and Tonkens’ 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

²⁶ Duyvendak & Tonkens 2007: B01 (my translation).

consequence, projects of multiculturalism and asylum policies are questioned and redefined to serve a more conservative, restrictive agenda. The ‘War on Terrorism’ waged after the Twin Tower 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), and the landslide conservative victory in the 2009 European elections exemplify a general swing to the political right which has turned European nationhood and identity into hotly debated issues. While a sense of an established home is increasingly lost, the battlements in defence of a so-called ‘European identity’ are being raised.²⁷ 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. Thus, Tariq Modood writes that, in its most liberal configurations of openness to difference:

Multiculturalism has had a less popular reception in mainland Europe. Its prospect has sometimes led to the success of extreme nationalist parties in local and national polls. In France, where intellectual objections to multiculturalism have been most developed, 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 gender, which promote part of the republic against the good of the whole, be confined to private life.²⁸

²⁷ In my current country of residence, Spain, the ideas put forward by FAES, the influential neo-conservative think-tank presided by the ex president of government, José María Aznar, illustrate the latter. Its 2007 round of summer conferences saw a host of illustrious speakers defend European identity from a perspective of racial and moral/Christian strength, purity and space: “We must ask immigrants to integrate and assimilate our fundamental values. Whoever agrees, fine, and whoever not, there’s the door” (anthropologist Mikel Azurmendi); Europe will end up being flushed down the drains of History ... Without children a nation cannot be raised ... Its massive dependency on immigration is bound to lead to structural weakness ... we need children” (Canadian writer Mark Stein); “Europe is quickly advancing towards Eurabia, as Islam has occupied the space that Europe has relinquished in the 21st c. because of a strong sense of guilt and inferiority, which has caused the identity crisis in which it is immersed. Europe shows serious signs of surrender and resignation” (PP senator Alejandro Muñoz Alonso); “Once our Christian awareness has disappeared ... our modernity has degenerated into a lack of judgment and criteria in which good and evil, right and wrong are no longer distinguishable” (award-winning author José Jiménez Losanto); “Nowadays the West is blamed for all evils. Multiculturalism has decidedly contributed to this erosion. The solution must be found in the reaffirmation of Western values” (writer Valentí Puig) (Quoted in Cué 2007: 18, my translation).

²⁸ Modood 2003.

1.3. Too Far for Discomfort?

Perhaps surprisingly, the distant shores of Australia may offer an Antipodean mirror to put these new, multicultural tensions in our continent into a manageable perspective. It 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. Australia, while seemingly on a far physical and spiritual remove from recent European turmoil, has a long history of raising disturbing questions on national identity and a sense of home. Indeed, as the destabilisation of identity is a universal feature of postmodern Western society, Australia may help to clarify the present European predicament. As a settler nation of European stock, Australia casts its postcolonial definition of Self and Foreigner/Other in ways which puts Western essentialist philosophies to the test and sounds an uncanny warning to current European positioning in multicultural matters. On the one hand, as a long-standing destination of immigration Australia has had a multicultural head start, being “amongst the first nations²⁹ 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 organization attempting to grapple with the questions and tensions untidily grouped together under that unsatisfactory term: multiculturalism.”³⁰ On the other hand, what makes the Australian case especially appropriate in order to understand and come to terms with the uncanny tensions that affect contemporary Europe is the fact that immigration in Australia precisely includes *all* Europeans. This group has only settled the island-continent over the past two centuries and in doing so, wreaked havoc on Australia’s Native population, the Aborigines and Torres-Strait Islanders. However, through the joint effect of more favourable policies and legislation, the latter have managed to recover positions of some political power over the last two decades or so.

Australian multiculturalism has been operative since the 1980s on the initiative of successive Labour governments, although the present decade of conservative rule has limited its presence as an active political instrument in multicultural relations. It was initially promoted so as to respect cultural diversity and “to lay to rest both the iniquitous

²⁹ Other nations to be counted amongst these forerunners are The USA and Canada.

³⁰ Gunew 2004: 1.

White Australia policy³¹—which had officially started with the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901³²—and the official immigration policy of ‘assimilation’³³ by addressing a series of material, educational and social needs of non-Anglo-Celtic, often Asian minorities.³³ However, in the 1990s multiculturalism also developed into an instrument aiming to accommodate the Aboriginal minority into Australian mainstream society, hitherto largely ignored.³⁴ After a rewriting of official Australian colonial history, government policies swung towards differential treatment of the Aborigines with Aborigine-inclusive multiculturalism, the founding of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation in 1992 and the new Native Title legislation of 1993. Positive discrimination towards the Natives and the possibility for Aborigines to regain ownership of some of their tribal land, up to then a legal impossibility, have nevertheless been seen as a serious threat by conservative mainstream society. They have turned into a source of uncanny multicultural tension in that they defamiliarised white mainstreamers from an Australian territory they felt ‘naturally’ theirs, thus creating a national space that was increasingly perceived as unhomey.

Bulldozed into what they felt to be a minority position and suffering from what they presumed were unjustified assaults on rights and properties inalienably theirs,³⁵ 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 maintained itself in power until 2008, aided by an unfavourable attitude nationwide towards ethnic policies after the 2001 World Trade Centre attack. Consequently, the conservative establishment has implemented more restrictive policies on immigration, epitomised in the Asian asylum seeker/*Tampa* crisis of August 2001.³⁶

³¹ 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 favouring European immigration into Australia. For its attempt to keep Australia ‘White’, it is often seen on a par with Australian policies of Aboriginal extermination in the 20th century.

³² Ang 2003: 51.

³³ Gunew 1990: 103, 115.

³⁴ Keating 1992; Mudrooroo 1997: 1.

³⁵ Gelder & Jacobs 1998: xii.

³⁶ Ang 2003: 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 travelling 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

Moreover, it has also cut back on recent achievements for the Aboriginal population, projecting them as an ‘undeserved’ privilege and problematic political heritage, while refusing to acknowledge that some kind of retribution for past atrocities is due.³⁷ Such a backlash notwithstanding, which denotes that the Natives have come too close for mainstream comfort, “Mabo³⁸ and the new Australian History ends the historical silence about the Aboriginal pre-colonial and colonial past upon which the conservative invention of Australia and Australianness was founded...”³⁹ Consequently, any sense of national belonging for White Australian settlers must involve a coming to terms with the Indigenous “skeleton at the feast.”⁴⁰

Bearing in mind these developments, it should come as no surprise that, “[a]lthough Aboriginals are numerically a small proportion of Australia’s population, their importance in the construction of Australian identity is disproportionate.”⁴¹ Thus, in his official address to the nation on Australia Day⁴² in 2002, the well-known White Australian environmental scientist Tim Flannery critically defined the attempt to incorporate the Aborigine into Australian identity as necessary and inevitable, but also problematic:

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

Government finally opted for the so-called “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 in Australia.

³⁷ Veracini 2003: 233.

³⁸ 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.

³⁹ Attwood 1996: 13.

⁴⁰ Read 2000: 1-2.

⁴¹ Hodge & Mishra 1990: xiv. At present the Indigenous population is about half a million of a total Australian population of 21 millions, who are largely of European descent (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006: 5).

⁴² Australia Day, the 26th of 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 Works Cited: “Australia Day”)

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.⁴³

In an analysis of some larger scope, the Dutch-Indonesian-Australian scholar Ien Ang holds that the combined effect of Aboriginal and non-European immigrant inclusion into mainstream society makes “a racially exclusionary White Australia ... no longer practically feasible or morally acceptable”.⁴⁴ Thus, the specificities of the Antipodean reversal of settler primacy may show that solutions for the European multicultural predicament cannot be found in the one-way street of assimilative thrust; they do not only beckon towards a redefinition of the Ethnic Other but also, and perhaps more importantly, of the White Self.

1.4. White Articulations of Identity in the Literary

While the present project inscribes itself within a framework similar to my minor thesis, *Issues of Identity in Contemporary Australian Fiction: An Uncanny Territory of Race and Gender*,⁴⁵ it aims to move further ahead by looking at Australian identity matters from the more disquieting viewpoint of the Indigenous writer while amplifying into class issues. In comparison, my minor thesis aligns more comfortably with my subject position as a White European academic as it analyses race/ethnic and gender issues in novels written from the perspective of the ‘White’ author in postcolonial Australia. The use of ‘White’ indicates that the novels discussed in my minor thesis—Elizabeth Jolley’s *The Well* and David Malouf’s *Remembering Babylon*—stage the interplay of gender and Aboriginality, Australia’s prime marker of ethnicity,⁴⁶ from a so-called non-Native point of view. Nevertheless, the inverted commas interrogate whether such non-Nativeness comfortably aligns with whiteness understood as the belonging to a male heterosexual Anglo-Saxon canon, which one might express with a capitalised Whiteness.

In the latter sense, Jolley’s placement within mainstream literature is interrogated by her position as a woman from a mixed British-Austrian background, which colours her

⁴³ Tim Flannery, *Australia Day Address 2002*.

⁴⁴ Ang 2003: 53.

⁴⁵ Presented in July 2006 at the University of Barcelona (unpublished).

⁴⁶ Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs 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.” (Gelder & Jacobs 1998: 98)

fiction in idiosyncratic ways.⁴⁷ Similarly, Malouf's inscription into the mainstream canon is complicated by his homosexuality⁴⁸ and his Christian-Libanese and Sephardi-British antecedents,⁴⁹ all of which determine his choice and treatment of themes. Not only by locating identity issues within the larger framework of Australian multicultural diversity but also within the changing objectives of multiculturalist policies regarding Indigenous difference over the last two decades, my minor thesis traces how the interplay of race/ethnicity and gender becomes a "vexed issue"⁵⁰ in *The Well* and *Remembering Babylon*.

In these uncanny instances of postcolonial mainstream Gothic, the troubled condition of Australian identity translates as a lack of narrative closure—it is suspended while the dramatic personae's White identities are seriously questioned, and this implies that gender and race/ethnicity must be constructively re-mapped in *Australian-specific* terms in order to reach solutions. As my reading of these novels tries to argue, the latter can only be achieved by the incorporation of the Native in the textual and identitarian landscape of Australia. Alan Sinfield's premise that "[w]e might think of the literary text as a particularizing pattern laid across the (changing) grid of social possibilities"⁵¹ is particularly useful here. Taking the material 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, *The Well* and *Remembering Babylon* reflect none other than the contradictory tensions in multicultural developments that contemporary Australian society struggles with, embodied by the incorporation of Indigenous difference in a complex interplay with class and gender.

These tensions may be termed uncanny in the Freudian sense⁵² in that they defamiliarise accepted conceptions of identity. The uncanny phenomenon of being in place and out of place simultaneously, which both *The Well* and *Remembering Babylon* map out as the estranging text/ure of postcolonial landscape, materializes as a distinctive trait of the Australian context of multiculturalism. 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

⁴⁷ Salzman 1993: 3, 8, 32.

⁴⁸ Holland 2002.

⁴⁹ Hanson 1992: 120-3.

⁵⁰ Gunew 1990: 100

⁵¹ Sinfield 1983: 3-4.

⁵² Freud: 1953a. 219-252. See chapter 2 for an in-depth discussion.

Australianness that fully acknowledges and tolerates 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 the recent politics of one decade of conservative Howard government have evidenced. 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”⁵³ but must be interpreted as in process or “postcolonising” as Eileen Moreton-Robertson has it.⁵⁴

This unsettling distance is fostered by what Hodge and Mishra once defined as a non-Native construction of the Aboriginal Other out of “the minimal material threat and the maximal threat to legitimacy,”⁵⁵ in which nowadays the former element can be seen to have disturbingly increased as well. Thus, my concern is with the articulation of Aboriginality within the larger framework of *postcolonising* multicultural Australia in the Indigenous effort to undo the uncanny inversion of settler primacy that for so long enthroned White Australians as the rightful owners of the land. More 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 Aboriginality 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 towards less essentialist, more performative notions of identity. For the purpose of my argument, this study will dedicate attention to the singular corpus—both in its literal and literary meaning—of one of Australia’s most international, prolific yet controversial ‘Aboriginal’ authors: Mudrooroo. Once again, my use of inverted commas points at the ambiguous nature of identity in a postcolonising society such as Australia. Not only do they highlight Mudrooroo’s highly contested status as a member of the Indigenous community—questioned from both Native and non-Native positions—but, conversely, they also highlight that the lexical fields of Aboriginality, race and ethnicity require some disambiguation.

⁵³ Shohat 1992: 101.

⁵⁴ Moreton-Robinson 2003: 37.

⁵⁵ Hodge and Mishra 1990: 25.

1.5. Aboriginal Articulations of Identity in the ‘Real’

The concept of Aboriginality⁵⁶ denotes membership of the Indigenous communities who have lived on the Australian continent for many thousands of years, long before its European occupation started.⁵⁷ Sneja Gunew, an authority in the field of multiculturalisms and the Australian case in particular, argues that race is a category that, in the Australian context, has been applied to Aboriginal peoples. Conflated with Aboriginality, race “should be seen as the symbolic marker of unabsorbable cultural difference,”⁵⁸ whereas Australianness is reserved for an often unacknowledged White “Anglo-Celtism.” However, ethnicity 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.”⁵⁹ She argues that ethnicity was postulated as “a way of circumventing the racist history of ‘race,’” and therefore has been associated with *absorbable* cultural difference. Thus, it 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.”⁶⁰ If we understand the ethnic as any manifestation of cultural rather than (a racialist interpretation of) presumed biological difference, what has often been understood as the Native’s unabsorbable difference—a feature beyond choice—is undoubtedly the most important but not the only ethnic marker in the Australian context. Gunew states that:

[the] chain of signification around difference as modernity and European civilization has, in the Australian context, allowed the Anglo-Celtic descendents 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

⁵⁶ In subsequent sections and chapters I shall capitalise Aboriginality, Indigeneity and Nativeness to differentiate their Australian specificity from non-Australian counterparts. I will also use these terms indistinctly to refer to the Indigenous-Australian population as a whole, including the Torres-Straight Islanders. Similarly, I shall capitalise Whiteness to indicate belonging to the Anglo-Celtic Australian mainstream.

⁵⁷ The landing of the First Fleet in Sydney Cove on 26 January 1788 marked the beginning of the European colonisation of Australia, when transportation of British convicts to Australia was initiated. Allegedly, Aboriginal populations lived on the Australian continent as early as 40 to 50,000 years ago.

⁵⁸ Ien Ang and John Stratton quoted in Gunew 2004: 100.

⁵⁹ Gunew 2004: 20.

⁶⁰ Gunew 2004: 21 (my emphasis).

others' many of whom in the wake of postwar migration came precisely from what is traditionally cited as continental Europe or the West.⁶¹

While according to Gunew Aboriginality 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 “[t]he label 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 Natives.⁶² One of the main problems surrounding the term is its signification within Western epistemology. The word Aboriginal is of European coinage, and it is nowadays generally acknowledged that, from the binary us-and-them perspective of the White coloniser, it blurs the distinctions among the different groups of Indigenous inhabitants of the continent, such as Nyoongars, Nangas, Yolngus and Murris, just to name a few of the long list of extant groups. Thus, in an article on contemporary Indigenous-Australian writing, the critic Joan Newman follows Native writer Eve Mumewa D. Fesl’s cue by opting for the Native word ‘Koori’⁶³ 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.”⁶⁴

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 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 Native cultural expression, and goes against the, probably unintended, danger of disenfranchisement provoked by the promotion of hybridity and heterogeneity in postcolonially-inspired academic output.⁶⁵ Similarly, Ella Shohat argues:

⁶¹ Gunew 2004: 10.

⁶² Langton 1993: 28.

⁶³ Koori is the term used by people from some Indigenous Australian nations in New South Wales and Victoria to 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.

⁶⁴ Newman 1996: 83, 84.

⁶⁵ Huggan 1993: 133.

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 ... If the logic of post-structuralist/post-colonial argument were taken literally, then ... the Jindyworobak in Australia [would be] criticized for their turn to Aboriginal language and culture as part of their own regeneration. 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?⁶⁶

Inevitably, the present study inscribes itself in the unresolved, *uncanny* tension one might claim, between the need for effective political strategies for Native entitlement and the very dissolution of the class, race and gender boundaries which fix Aboriginal subjectivities. While it is evident that Aboriginality and race cannot be fixed into mere biological givens, and are just forms of cultural difference along with class and gender, it is nevertheless for reasons of political effectiveness that I consistently choose to refer to Aboriginality in terms of race in this dissertation. This seems a dangerous game to play indeed, but the term race, as a 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 Aboriginality.

Despite its forbidding and deceptively essentialist homogeneity, then, the definition of Aboriginality has been the object of important shifts in perception over the last four

⁶⁶ Shohat 1992: 110. Founded by Rex Ingamells, the Jindyworobak Movement was a romantically-inspired nationalistic Australian literary movement whose White members sought to promote Indigenous Australian ideas and customs, particularly in poetry. Active from the 1930s to 1950s, the movement aimed to combat the influx of 'alien' culture, which was threatening local art. As Michael Ackland writes, "The name of Ingamells' group derived from a native word supposed to mean to annex or to join, and underscored his aim to wed white and black traditions to produce a unique Australian civilisation. Again belated Romanticism informed a nationalist program. Imagining that the Aborigines had adapted to and absorbed an unchanging environment, Ingamells held that their language and thought were a special expression of climatic and physical conditions. The spirituality lacking in the West was rediscovered in the outback, and the Indigenous word identified with a suggestive magic which Ingamells hoped to replicate in his own verse ..." (2000: 88-9).

decades. As recent as the 1960s, being considered Aboriginal 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.”⁶⁷ The first attempts at multiculturalism, after the 1960s and 70s protest movements had left their mark on Australian society and politics, proposed mere assimilationist strategies to accommodate the Native segment of the population. Under the latter the Natives were coaxed to give up their Aboriginal for a Whitewashed identity—provided their skin-colour and factions thus allowed. Nevertheless, the issue of Australian identity would take a different but no less controversial turn in the 1990s, when Aboriginality was imbued with more positive content and to receive differential treatment because of the new legislation on Indigenous land rights and the move towards Aborigine-inclusive multiculturalism.

Sneja Gunew therefore holds that, nowadays, the differences between ethnicity and (Aboriginality 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 analyses establishing the mechanisms of racism and racialized forms of power which result in certain groups gaining ‘race privilege’.”⁶⁸ Gunew’s analysis highlights that Aboriginality should be seen as just another manifestation of ethnicity, and points towards 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, uncanny shape in Australia and acquired political profile. Within the new context of Australian Common Law and Aborigine-inclusive multiculturalism, Aboriginality has been seen as ‘over-privileged’ by conservative factions of the mainstream public.⁶⁹ This is a development somewhat similar to the perception of ethnicity in contemporary Europe but different in that the threat comes from the ‘stranger within’ rather than ‘the stranger without’, heightening its uncanny potential as chapter 2 will point out.

With the Mabo Judgment of 1992, the Australian High Court revoked the legal concept of Terra Nullius, which had denied human occupation of the Australian territory prior to British settlement, ignored the Indigenous presence in Australia and made Native landownership impossible for over 200 years of White colonisation. When the Native

⁶⁷ Mudrooroo 1997a: 92

⁶⁸ Gunew 2004: 21.

⁶⁹ See Ken Gelder and Jane Jacob’s *Uncanny Australia* (1998) for an in-depth discussion of this issue.

Title Act came into being in 1993 as a recognised 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 colonisation.⁷⁰ It should come as no surprise that the remapping of the Australian territory with its Ab/original inhabitants, together with the development of positive discrimination policies towards the Natives, led to a redefinition of Australian national identity which unleashed all sorts of uncanny tensions. Both place and identity could no longer be assigned according to European—i.e. Anglo-Celtic—standards alone, thus dislocating White essentialist readings of Australia in an uncanny reversal of settler primacy.⁷¹ What is more, while White Australians might recognise the need for redress for past wrongs towards the Natives, this would clash with fear regarding the potential loss of privilege and property.⁷² Indeed, in this politicised context, Aboriginality became highly contested. Suddenly, those who were able to assert Native ancestry could claim privileges—government funding in all sorts of areas, access to and ownership of tribal land etc.—which until then had been reserved to the White mainstream. Thus, White resistance was rife, notably amongst pastoralists of European stock and mining lobbies in rural Australia, who felt that the Aboriginal segment of the population became entitled to too much.

In such a regime of Native 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 Native belonging would apply, thus putting essentialist/racist pressure back on the definition of Aboriginality. While progressive scholarship such as Kent McNeil and Henry Reynolds has pointed out that this demand for authentication is unfair,⁷³ not surprisingly the matter of authentication has turned out to be highly problematic for a large proportion of the Indigenous population. Many of Aboriginal descent have lost trace of their origins, not least by displacement from their tribal lands; by the denial of Aboriginal ancestry within their own families due to feelings of shame; and by the scathing effects of the Stolen Generations—the institutionalised, forced removal of children of mixed descent from their Aboriginal families between 1920 and 1970.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Gelder & Jacobs 1998: 135-6.

⁷¹ Gelder & Jacobs 1998: 135, 138.

⁷² Gelder & Jacobs 1998: 17.

⁷³ See Kent McNeil 1996 and Henry Reynolds 2003.

⁷⁴ Katherine Ellinghaus points out that such a “removal of [part-Aboriginal] children became common practice in all Australia as the [20th] century progressed” (Ellinghaus 2003: 196).

As Lucy Frost holds, “[a]ny construction of identity, whether individual or collective, relies on *narrative* to produce a defining shape,”⁷⁵ and not surprisingly, 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 against 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 autobiographical ‘life-writing’ such as Sally Morgan’s *My Place* (1987) respond to the unequivocally political agenda of rewriting Australian history on Indigenous-friendly terms by testifying to and contesting the scathing effects of (neo)colonialist policies. The same holds for fictional accounts such as Mudrooroo’s *Master* series, Kim Scott’s *True Country* (1993) and *Benang* (1999) and Alexis Wright’s *Plains of Promise* (1997) and *Carpentaria* (2006).

Thus, the articulation of Aboriginality as the authority to decide who does and does not belong to the Native segment of the Australian population and the right to represent and speak on behalf of the Indigenous community have turned into a highly contested ground. It involves different lobbies such as tribal groups, academia, politicians, judges, lawyers, pastoralists and mining industries, disputing who may determine what Aboriginality entails so as to negotiate access to or denial of newly acquired rights and privileges. This political impetus explains why the debate is so heated and why Aborigines often refuse any non-Native 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 wrote that “[f]oremost 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.”⁷⁶ And a good decade later Sneja Gunew, a self-defined *ethnic* Australian scholar now living in Canada,⁷⁷ still claimed that “[t]here appears to be an interesting battle here around who may lay claim to ‘our Natives’, where

⁷⁵ Frost 1997 (my emphasis).

⁷⁶ Huggins 2003: 60.

⁷⁷ Her father has Bulgarian and her mother German ancestry.

debates are conducted in terms of ‘who gets it right,’ that is, who ‘owns’ or is able to legislate upon representations of the ‘Native’.”⁷⁸

Stephen Pritchard illustrates Gunew’s point with an incisive analysis of how Australian courts may de-authorise Aboriginal spokespeople when these claim their rights. Interestingly, the case referred to, the Hindmarsh Island Bridge affair of 1995-6, maps strongly across gender, as it involves a claim on a sacred site connected to Ngarrindjeri women’s beliefs and traditions.⁷⁹ 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’; not surprisingly, Pritchard echoes the legal concept of *terra nullius* in coining the term *vox nullius* to express the court’s effectively silencing these women.⁸⁰

But the discussion spills over into other terrains as well. In a Foucauldian analysis of an important academic debate on discourses of Aboriginality carried out in the *Oceania* journal in 1992 and 1993, Carolyn D’Cruz claims that:

The matter of who speaks for and about whom is possibly the most sensitive and impassioned issue circulating within discourses of identity politics. More often than not, *before confronting any other qualifying prerequisite to speak*, a speaker must satisfy the criteria of bearing the marker of identity that one is speaking about ... In various public spaces in Australia, both issues—the right to speak and the question concerning what constitutes authentic Aboriginal identity—are debated with burning regularity.⁸¹

She goes on to cite David Hollinsworth, who, as the non-Aboriginal 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.”⁸² This, of course, is an eminently *strategic* view of Aboriginal *positionality*.

⁷⁸ Gunew 2004: 47.

⁷⁹ Pritchard 2000.

⁸⁰ “The term ‘business’ is often used to name a broad and diverse range of Australian Aboriginal sacred, ritual, or customary practices and beliefs” (Pritchard 2000).

⁸¹ Carolyn D’Cruz 2001.

⁸² D’Cruz quotes from p. 137 of Hollinsworth’s “Discourses on Aboriginality and the Politics of Identity in Australia” in *Oceania* 63.2 (1992): 137-55.

1.6. Aboriginal Articulations of Identity in the Literary

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.” Thus they explained their interest in Australian literature as an arena where such a “doomed quest for symbolic forms of legitimacy” is played out.⁸³ In this sense the authenticity debate, as a discourse on the legitimation of identities, strategically links up with literary manifestations. This is underlined in Sneja Gunew’s argument that:

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?⁸⁴

Similarly, the critic 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.”⁸⁵

As I speak/write from a non-Aboriginal, European academic background, the present study therefore entails some 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 institutionalisation tends to confer a certain amount of legitimacy to them. I would like to stress that such legitimacy is by no means intended or assumed and therefore open to interrogation.

⁸³ Hodge & Mishra 1991: x.

⁸⁴ Gunew 2004: 69.

⁸⁵ Newman 1996: 84.

Secondly, as a white, middleclass, heterosexual Dutchman living and working in Spain I inevitably approximate Aboriginal literature from a perspective that is imbued with European cultural baggage and encapsulates the danger of a neo-colonialist re-appropriation of the Aboriginal 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...”⁸⁶ However, I would like to defend my project by foregrounding my interest in Aboriginal writing as it *interrogates* and *rewrites* traditional Western perceptions of race, gender and class—and therefore: myself. The scope of Australian Aboriginal writing in English is not limited to Native readership alone but also has an important function in speaking out to the rest of the world. The Indigenous writer Alexis Wright, for example, states in an address at the Sydney Opera House, later published as “Politics of Writing”, that “[t]he 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.”⁸⁷ As such Indigenous Australian literature demands that we, non-Native outsiders, listen carefully and learn to unfix the rigid boundaries of race/ethnicity, class, and gender which for so long have tended to define subject positions in an Orientalist⁸⁸ vein, constructing ourselves in *opposition* to the lower-class, native *and* female Other. In such a perspective, not giving ear to Aboriginal views of the world would be equivalent to the controlled silencing Aborigines have been subject to for over 200 years of white domination, and, in doing so, has served to establish our own, Western subjectivity.

Thirdly, in selecting four writers and their work, four literal and literary *corpi*⁸⁹ in which the uncanny forcefully manifests itself, I have deemed it necessary to address the case of Mudrooroo, whose authentication as an Aboriginal writer has become fatally troublesome. 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 thesis is appropriate since the notion of in-authenticity he incarnates is one of the most salient manifestations of the uncanny in Australian identitarian territory nowadays. Indeed, there is a certain obsession with fraud and frauds in Australian literature, as in the fiction of Peter Carey,⁹⁰ the media-hyped questioning of the Indigeneity of such authors as Archie Weller and Roberta Sykes, and the intentional

⁸⁶ Said 1995: 11.

⁸⁷ Wright 2002: 19.

⁸⁸ See Edward Said’s seminal study *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (1979) for an analysis of the construction of the Western Self in opposition to the Ethnic Other.

⁸⁹ I play on corpus (L) = physical body; as well as corpus (E) = body of literary output by an author.

⁹⁰ See for instance his *My Life as a Fake* (2003) and *Theft* (2006).

frauds of Wanda Koolmatrie and B. Wongar.⁹¹ Mudrooroo's ostracisation 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 justify its own empowerment. It appears fair to say that Mudrooroo's case is uncannily caught between the political realities imposed by the existence of a racial divide and the ideal to overcome such a division. That is to say, there exists an uneasy tension between, on the one hand, the need for a politics of the Indigenous body in the service of a form of Native agency expressed through self-definition and self-determination; and on the other hand, a call for a postmodern shift away from the traditional biological fixing of identity in terms of race, gender and class towards an awareness of its cultural articulation along these three axes, which presents identities as an effect of performance rather than an immanent essence bound by originality and authenticity.

This tension engages with the parameters of Aboriginality in the current constellation of Australian society. The recovery of Aboriginality 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 because such a notion of authenticity also underpins the allegedly progressive, emancipatory legislation of Native Title and policies of multiculturalism. Thus, the Aboriginal 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 en political positions is that *those positions become reified and the critical debate necessary for a community of modernity is stifled.*⁹²

Openness of definition beyond strict biological notions of race would allow the Indigenous re-inscription of the vast amount of mixed offspring resulting from the Stolen

⁹¹ Van Toorn 2000: 41-44.

⁹² He reacted to Mudrooroo's "disquieting and exclusionary" views on Aboriginality professed in the ABC's literature programme *Between the Lines* in 1995 (Morrissey 2003: 52-3, my emphasis).

Generations by accepting their articulation of identity as just another manifestation of Indigeneity induced by recent historical circumstances.

Nevertheless, Mudrooroo remains a much-disputed borderline case of (non-) Aboriginality whose lived Native experience is offset by a lack of Aboriginal 'blood', and further troubled by the accusation he may have tried to hide his non-Indigenous ancestry. Thus, he has developed into a showcase for the uncanny liminal tensions in a prevailing self-definition of Indigeneity that uncomfortably attempts to straddle between inclusiveness and the need to maintain clear borders of group membership for an effective politics of Native empowerment within the existing mainstream legal and political framework.⁹³ While vital experience and commitment are indeed recognised as important elements of Aboriginality, it appears that Indigenous Australia cannot afford *not* to insist upon the essentialist notion of genetic ancestry for its community members in order to authorise its rights (and de-authorise others') within a larger society whose laws and policies are conditioned by a determinist history of racial oppression and genocide. Thus, a *strategic*, non-essentialist employment of an Indigenous politics of the body is—perhaps uncannily, 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 materialise.

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 re-inscriptions of race, class and gender into the Australian land/textscape through the fiction of some contemporary authors who may write from a complex and even contested background of Aboriginal 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 utilise writing as their main means of transmission, unlike Indigenous Australian culture, which primes the oral. Thus, I will give special attention to the re-appropriation and reconfiguration of Western literary genres by the articulation of a written Aboriginal discourse in Australian literature. The uncanny textual interface this creates I shall define as *Postcolonising Dreaming Narrative*.

⁹³ For example, whereas Mudrooroo's older brother claims, "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 local Dumbartung Aboriginal Corporation's head, Robert Egginton, typically insists upon Aboriginal protocols of identification to sift out illegitimate users of "resources earmarked for [the Aboriginal] community" (van Toorn 2000: 42).

In order to establish an interpretative framework, I shall explore the different concepts that have appeared throughout this introduction in a methodological chapter that looks at the uncanny and its postcolonising manifestations. From there on I shall narrow down to Australian multiculturalism and its recent developments, which have increasingly contributed to unsettling notions of Australian identity in a typically postcolonising move that could be defined 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*.⁹⁴

Loomba concludes that “race, gender and sexuality are not just additive to each other in the colonial arena; they do not just provide metaphors and images for each other, but work together and develop in each other’s crucible” while overlapping with issues of class.⁹⁵ Thus, conversely, the opening up of the race binary should automatically have its effects in the terrains of class and gender. I shall close this first section with a discussion of the re-appropriation and adaptation of the European Fantastic and Gothic and South-American Magic-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 postcolonising configuration of the uncanny as it articulates the return of the repressed (Native). In its articulation of the return rather than the substitution of the Aboriginal

⁹⁴ Loomba 1998: 159 (my emphasis).

⁹⁵ Loomba 1998: 172.

Sacred or Dreaming,⁹⁶ the configuration of an Indigenous-Australian genre of *Postcolonising Dreaming Narrative* could be identified to operate beyond the parameters of the Fantastic, Gothic and Magic Realism. The idiosyncrasy of the *return* of the sacred can be seen in the light of Rosemary Jackson's argument that in the Fantastic mode in Western literature, under which the Gothic and Magic-Realism may be subsumed,

... 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.⁹⁷

In subsequent sections, I will discuss how the general output of Native-authored novels increasingly contributes to the creation of this idiosyncratic, Indigenous-Australian literary genre. In order to do so, I will trace manifestations of the postcolonising uncanny in the work of two male and two female authors who write from an Aboriginal point of view. From a political point of view, 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 decade-long conservative backlash in politics, and the Labor government's recent official Apology for past grief caused to the Stolen Generations,.

Chapter 3 focuses on Sally Morgan's *My Place* (1987), a fictionalised polyphonic auto/biography which moves towards Postcolonising Dreaming Narrative by introducing Gothic, Magic-Realist and Dreaming elements. The novel spans three generations and explores the recovery of hidden Indigenous roots by a young woman of part-Aboriginal descent, living in the outskirts of Perth. Published just before the Bicentennial,⁹⁸ *My*

⁹⁶ 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 the present. In such a view, the past and present as 'intangible spirituality' and 'tangible reality' are inseparable elements of life.

⁹⁷ Jackson 1981: 158 (my emphasis). She quotes from Fredric Jameson's article "Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre." *New Literary History* 7.1 (Autumn 1975), p.145.

⁹⁸ The Bicentennial was the special two-centenary version of Australia Day—a public holiday on 26 January each year—the mainstream celebration of the beginning of the British colonisation of Australia

Place marked a new era in Australian literature in that it foregrounded the autobiographical genre of *Aboriginal life-writing* to 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 centre on the sentiment of guilt about the treatment of the original owners of the land, the Aboriginal peoples.⁹⁹ Morgan’s auto/biography would acquire a strategic place within mainstream attempts to come to terms with this discomfiting past.

Chapter 4 is dedicated to the work of Mudrooroo, a male author who stands out for a long-standing and influential commitment to the Aboriginal cause in activism, theoretical work, poetry and fiction. This notwithstanding, his Aboriginal identity and entitlement to speak on behalf of the Indigenous community have been seriously questioned over the last decade. This de-authorisation is caused by the combined effect of his unclear tribal affiliation, and his intransigent position in Aboriginal politics. It is further compounded by his masculinist positioning on issues of gender, so that what many a critic considers his misogynist criticism of Sally Morgan’s auto/biography has also fed into his current identity plight. How his turbulent relationship with race and gender have affected the articulation of identity issues in his latest fiction, I aim to trace in an analysis of *Maban Reality* in his fiction, his proposal for a genre that interweaves elements of Magic Realism, Fantasy, the Gothic and Dreaming narrative.¹⁰⁰ *Maban Reality* would start taking shape in *Doctor Wooreddy’s Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World* (1983), and develop fully in his *Master* series of four novels written between 1991 and 2000.¹⁰¹ The quintet proposes a peculiar, postcolonising form of Aboriginal life-writing with a troubled inscription into Postcolonising Dreaming Narrative.

In chapter 5 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 also mixes

200 years earlier. Both the Bicentennial and Australia Day are, nowadays, highly disputed celebrations, the latter also being known as “Invasion Day”, “Shame Day” and “Sorrow Day” amongst Aborigines.

⁹⁹ Hodge and Mishra 1991: ix,x.

¹⁰⁰ A maban is an Aboriginal (sha)man invested with special powers which emanate from the Dreaming. In Mudrooroo’s view, maban reality is akin to magic realism: it “might be characterised 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 as existent and as real as that constructed by European thought” (Mudrooroo 1997a: 97-8).

¹⁰¹ *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* (1991); *The Undying* (1998); *Underground* (1999); *The Promised Land* (2000).

Magic Realism, the Gothic and the Dreaming into an instance of Postcolonising Dreaming Narrative so as to address the process of redefining Indigeneity. His *True Country* (1993) may be described as an uncanny male reconfiguration of the genre of Aboriginal lifewriting that *My Place* popularized amongst so many women writers, while *Benang* (1999) brings into uncanny profile the racist contradictions in the policies of the Stolen Generations and interracial marriage. The latter novel, finished under PM John Howard's conservative rule and co-winner of the prestigious Miles Franklin Literary Award in 2000, constitutes another step up towards the configuration of Postcolonising Dreaming Narrative as an independent Indigenous Australian literary genre. It criticizes the politics of absorption and assimilation by centring on "the first white man born"¹⁰² in a part-Aboriginal family, tying the plight of the Stolen Generations in to the eugenic misdeeds of Augustus O. Neville, the highest authority in Aboriginal affairs in Western Australia between 1915 and 1940.¹⁰³

Chapter 6 concentrates on Northern Queensland author Alexis Wright, whose *Plains of Promise* (1997) also comments on the genre of Aboriginal lifewriting and represents what critics generally see as a highly-personal, Australian form of Magic Realism.¹⁰⁴ Wright's explosion of the Western form of the realist novel so as to accommodate an Aboriginal world of experience takes shape around the struggle of three generations of women of mixed Aboriginal descent against uprootedness in class, racial and gender terms. Born out of the author's disappointment with conservative post-Mabo politics,¹⁰⁵ it may be read as a troubling reply to the notion of reconciliation with an Aboriginal 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*

¹⁰² Scott 1999: 10.

¹⁰³ In her historical essay "Absorbing the 'Aboriginal Problem': controlling interracial marriage in Australia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries," Katherine Ellinghaus makes special mention of Scott's *Benang* "[f]or a fictional treatment of the effect of Neville's policies on Western Australian Aboriginal people" (Ellinghaus 2003: 190).

¹⁰⁴ For example, Jenny Pausacker in the Melbourne *Age* (reprinted on the UQP 1998 edition cover of *Plains of Promise*).

¹⁰⁵ "By the time I had come to making the decision to write a novel in the 1990s, I guess I was at a time of deep inner personal crisis I was experiencing about everything I had ever believed in about our rights as people. I was questioning the failures of our hopes for just about everything we fought for. Every idea and goal was overtaken by others. Governments found new ways of making our lives harder. We did not seem to gel as a political movement at either the national, state or regional level. As individuals,, as communities, as peoples with Indigenous rights, *everything* we did to accomplish anything seem[ed] to be a meaningless exercise because the force of ingrained, inherited racism stood against us. I wrote *Plains of Promise* to deal with my inner crisis and loneliness of the soul. Writing was away of consoling myself in this crisis of the mind to the very real threat we were facing as Waanyi people" (2002: 12).

series. Finally, it develops the incorporation of the Dreaming and the issue of uncanny hybridism in the Stolen Generations as Kim Scott's award-winning *Benang* also explores. In the manner with which it rewrites the uncanny interface of the Native and non-Native worlds, *Plains of Promise* could be more successfully understood as an instance of Postcolonising Dreaming Narrative than Magic Realism.

I will finish my discussion with Alexis Wright's award-winning novel *Carpentaria* (2006), as I believe it culminates the configuration of a hybrid yet 'authentically-Indigenous' Australian literary genre tentatively called Postcolonising Dreaming Narrative. It uncannily refashions the archetypal Western epic along the parameters of the Indigenous story-telling tradition to confer a sense of heroism and collective-identity building to the Aboriginal 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 70 years earlier. Moreover, it counters the troubling, disempowering Gothic inscription of Indigeneity materialising towards the end of Mudrooroo's *Master* series, which bides little good for the Native future. Lastly, it follows up on Scott's engagement with the Native community and land; solving Morgan's struggle with the tension between the individual and the communal in favour of the latter, *Carpentaria* promotes a wholesome inscription of Indigeneity in collective belonging to country. Priming the Dreaming over Magic Realist and Gothic features, it exemplifies the Indigenous Australian effort towards the constitution of a recognisably 'authentic' story-telling tradition in writing. In *Carpentaria*, the genre of Postcolonising Dreaming Narrative necessarily hybridises Western and Aboriginal form and content but stands out as a new and independent form of Indigenous Australian literary art.

Thus, my conclusion aims to forward Postcolonising Dreaming Narrative 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 story-making and telling; it seeks to wrestle Aboriginality away from essentialist visions of race, class and gender; and it necessarily rewrites the Australian multiculturalist agenda by haunting its neo-assimilationist traits. A prime tool in the postcolonising take on identity formation in this dissertation is a series of re-interpretations of the Freudian uncanny¹⁰⁶ in the realm of non-signification. In order to

¹⁰⁶ Freud, Sigmund. "The Uncanny." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Ed. & trs. James Strachey, vol. XVII. London: Hogarth, 1953a. 219-252.

establish the uncanny's postcolonising potential I will address Hélène Cixous' psychoanalytical thought,¹⁰⁷ as well as the theoretical work of Homi Bhabha, Slavoj Žižek and Judith Butler amongst others. Through their analyses, the uncanny opens up the categories of race/ethnicity, class and gender to multiple, shifting readings and beckons towards the performativity rather than fixity of identity.

¹⁰⁷ Cixous, Hélène. "Fiction and its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's *Das Unheimliche* (The 'uncanny')." *New Literary History* 7.3 (Spring 1976). 525-48.

Chapter 2

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”

(Aileen Moreton-Robinson 2003: 30)

This methodological chapter aims to develop an interlinked socio-historic literary framework from which to analyse literal and literary manifestations of the Aboriginal 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 feeds into reconfigurations of the racialised, classist and gendered parameters of Australian multiculturalism. Such an analysis takes us inevitably back to stereotypical representations of Australianness: how, traditionally, these have either excluded the Aboriginal or re-incorporated the Indigenous element as folklore, and how re-inscriptions, re-articulations and re-authorisations of race, class and gender inevitably draw on manifestations of the uncanny.

Thus, this section looks at the uncanny as a tool in articulating difference from a psychological, postcolonial and literary perspective, starting out with a Freudian discussion of the concept, and building towards its social and cultural manifestations in postcolonial society. The chapter moves on to a discussion of Australian multiculturalism and its recent development towards unsettling, uncanny notions of Australian identity, placing such unsettlement not only within the parameters of race and the ethnic but gender and class as well. Finally, it describes how this process bears on literature with a discussion of the appropriation and adaptation of Western genres by Indigenous writers in their attempt to articulate and authorise liberating, postcolonising notions of self in terms of race, gender and class. Specifically, it aims to show how contemporary Australian Aboriginal writing develops towards what I shall refer to as *Postcolonising Dreaming Narrative*, not only because it articulates Otherness as the psychologically repressed

through an unsettling appeal to the uncanny, but also because it de-Westernises and de-rationalises difference by embedding it within the Aboriginal Sacred.¹⁰⁸

2.1. Psychological Origins of the Uncanny

Any investigation of the appearance and use of the uncanny in postcolonial literature must take into account Sigmund Freud's semantic study of the concept, written and first published in 1919. Freud's essay should be understood in its cultural and historical situatedness—the end of the Victorian Era and the crisis of European Modernity as embodied in the onslaught of the First World War. Freud's interest was fuelled by the anguish expressed in works of art in the aftermath of devastating armed conflict in the war trenches of Europe. Thus, coining his essay a study in aesthetics, whose terms the psychoanalyst purposefully expands from a narrow concept of beauty to the broader “theory of the qualities of feelings,” Freud is concerned with the “special core of feeling” that the uncanny represents “within the field of what is frightening.”¹⁰⁹ As well as an investigation in aesthetics, his study has a strong linguistic and psychological component as he unravels the ambiguous semantic core of the uncanny.

Freud's starting point is that the German equivalent of “uncanny” (*unheimlich*, literally “unhomely” in English) “is obviously the opposite of *heimlich* [“homely”], *heimisch* [“native”]—the opposite of what is familiar.” But this does not imply that “what is uncanny is frightening precisely because it is *not* known and familiar;” rather “[s]omething has to be added to what is novel and unfamiliar to make it uncanny.”¹¹⁰ Freud proposes that the solution to this semantic problem is to be found in the different, opposed meanings of *Heimlich*—on the one hand signifying “well”, “unafraid” and “familiar”; on the other “concealed”, “secret”, “hidden”, “obscure”, “withdrawn from knowledge”, and “dangerous”. This implies that *unheimlich* is already a kind of *heimlich*, as it precisely expresses the latter's set of negative meanings. To quote Freud, “*heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*.” Concluding that the uncanny encompasses everything that “ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light,” Freud

¹⁰⁸ Rosemary Jackson 1981: 158. She bases her reasoning on Fredric Jameson (Autumn 1975). “Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre.” *New Literary History* 7.1: 145.

¹⁰⁹ Freud 1953: 219.

¹¹⁰ Freud 1953: 220-1.

analyses a series of situations, taken from fact and fiction, in which the uncanny can be said to obtain.¹¹¹

Through a series of ambiguities, inversions and reversals, Freud elaborates the concept in psychoanalytic terms, pointing out that the repression of certain experiences and emotions, often in infancy, tends to transform into an anxiety which may give rise to uncanny feelings when they finally resurface. Therefore, the uncanny is “in reality 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.” In a broader sense, the psychological uncanny may occur “when primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed.”¹¹² And here the specific disturbing, unsettling quality of the uncanny can be successfully located: it is precisely *the familiar turning strange*. Drawing on the work of his disciple Otto Rank,¹¹³ the psychoanalyst recognises a prime example of the uncanny in the double, because what is more homely and yet *un*-homely (and therefore frightening) than an *alter-ego*? The double may manifest itself in different shapes: in “the look alike” or in “the subject identify[ing] with somebody else, so that he is in doubt as to which his self is, or substitut[ing] the extraneous self for his own.” The double may also appear in the idea of “constant recurrence” of “features or character-traits or vicissitudes ... through several consecutive generations.” Lastly, it may manifest itself in a narcissistic version of the double as a protection against death or its opposite; this is “the uncanny harbinger of death,” both of which are epitomised in “reflections in mirrors, ... shadows, ... guardian spirits” etc.¹¹⁴ Importantly, the double is also linked to our capacity for self-observation, self-criticism and self-censorship. This, in turn, would connect the uncanny to (gaps in) our self-knowledge, to an ambivalent un/covering of facts about ourselves in our psyche that may become estranging, confronting and unsettling. Summing up, the psychological uncanny can be described as that quality of feeling—fright, disturbance, uneasiness—connected to the familiar made strange, and is occasioned by the resurfacing of repressed feelings, hidden aspects of the self and secret, hidden knowledge.

Having based his findings partially on literature, Freud finally highlights how the uncanny may manifest itself in fiction. He points out that, although there are more means

¹¹¹ Freud 1953: 225-6

¹¹² Freud 1953: 241, 249.

¹¹³ 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 further), although it was only published 1925.

¹¹⁴ Freud 1953: 234-5.

to create uncanny effects in literature than in ordinary life, what is often uncanny in fiction would not be perceived as such in real life, because its manifestation is firmly rooted in the realm of fantasy. Nevertheless, Freud gives an unexpected twist to the argument by specifying that uncanny effects may yet obtain when writers “pretend[-] to move into the world of common reality” with their fiction. Thus, fiction may precisely increase and multiply its uncanny effect “far beyond what could happen in reality, by bringing about events which never or very rarely happen in fact.” Indeed, the uncanny effect perceived by the reader in such (realist) fiction is related to the plausibility of the fictional event. Additionally, 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 ...”¹¹⁵ The importance of these observations for my subsequent discussion is that postcolonial worlds described in literary fiction may be taken as plausible yet unfathomable universes which in hiding their precise nature from Western readers/observers release uncanny, defamiliarising effects and blur the edges of their own reality. Once again, it is from the margins that a redefinition of a Western worldview and identity is to be expected, and the uncanny, as a fringe concept, naturally ties in with such a project.

The French feminist writer, critic and philosopher Hélène Cixous elaborates on the latter in offering a gendered reading that draws on the indefiniteness encapsulated in the Freudian uncanny, whose liminality—understood as a lack of prototypicality—she ultimately links to notions of non-representation. She points out that:

... 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”.¹¹⁶

She therefore defines the tantalising objective of the Freudian inquiry as follows: “is there any emergence, through the *Unheimliche*, of a *new* concept? ... [W]hat, in fact, holds Freud’s attention is precisely this *something absolutely new* ... which, nevertheless,

¹¹⁵ Freud 1953: 249-51.

¹¹⁶ Cixous 1976: 528.

cannot be ‘found’ there but which ... slips into this disturbing domain.”¹¹⁷ Thus, Cixous proceeds to elaborate on the uncanny by psychoanalysing the Freudian account of the Sand-Man tale by E.T.A. Hoffman, an author whom Freud qualifies as “the unrivalled master of the uncanny in literature.”¹¹⁸

This story about the repetitive resurgence of a disturbing childhood memory, which centres on an imaginary, haunting character reputed to tear out children’s eyes, is instrumental in the Viennese psychiatrist’s interpretation of the uncanny, as Cixous points out. Freud recognises the Oedipal nature of the narrative, whose protagonist Nathaniel “cannot, [i]n spite of his present happiness, ... banish the memories associated with the mysterious and terrifying death of his beloved father” in which, to his mind, the frightening Sand-Man seems involved.¹¹⁹ The Oedipus myth from classical Greece is interpreted by Freud as an expression of the prohibition on and fear of incest—Oedipus killed his father, married his mother without knowing it and blinded himself when he found out. As Oedipus had been figuratively blind about the true, incestual nature of the love and death triangle he was involved in, his punishment for transgressing the taboo on incest aptly translates to a physical loss of sight. The latter, in turn, is only “a mitigated form of the punishment of castration—the only punishment that was adequate for him by the *lex talionis*.”¹²⁰ Notably, Freud deems the Oedipus complex at the basis of all human neurosis¹²¹ and considers it the foundational source of art and human civilisation at large.¹²² In Freud’s interpretation of Hoffman’s disturbing Oedipal tale, several mother figures appear whom Nathaniel is in love with—notably the uncanny automaton Olympia—but projections of the Sandman, the irascible alter-ego of the male protagonist’s seemingly gentle father, consequently block the consummation of what Freud identifies as Nathaniel’s incestuous wishes. Freud asks, “why does Hoffmann bring the anxiety about eyes into such intimate connection with the father’s death? And why does the Sand-Man always appear as a disturber of love?”¹²³ Therefore, through the uncanny doubling of the father resulting from his obsession with the Sand-Man, the now

¹¹⁷ Cixous 1976: 531.

¹¹⁸ Freud 1953: 233. E.T.A. Hoffman 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.

¹¹⁹ Freud 1953: 227.

¹²⁰ Freud 1953: 231.

¹²¹ 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*, CUP 2005. <http://columbia.thefreedictionary.com/>).

¹²² Freud 1998: 134 (my emphasis).

¹²³ Freud 1953: 230.

adult Nathaniel ends up killing the father figure and punishes himself by precipitating himself to his own end— through death, the Oedipal sequence turns from blindness to castration.

Importantly, 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 uncanny:

He minimizes the uncertainty revolving around Olympia, thus pushing Olympia toward the group of the *Heimliche* and clearly diminishing the texture of the story by trimming, in particular, the discontinuity of the exposition, the sequence, the succession of narrators, and points of view. These interventions organize a confrontation between the Sand-Man and Nathaniel which is much more sustained and obsessive but also less surprising than the original version.¹²⁴

Thus, Cixous sees Freud as the victim of his own gender-conditioning: in his insistence on rationalizing Nathaniel's neurosis, his "entire analysis of the *Unheimliche* is characterized ... by [his] resistance to castration and its effectuality."¹²⁵ While Freud himself concedes "that anxiety about one's eyes, the fear of going blind, is often enough a substitute for the dread of being castrated,"¹²⁶ the thrust of his study of the uncanny ultimately glosses over and represses this link of *male* sexual and mortal terror; 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 "[a]s 'an anticipatory sign' the uncanny alludes to the death pulse."¹²⁷

Cixous, then, elaborates on the narrative's expression of male fear of sex and death. Thus, she allocates gender to the uncanny and takes it into the realm of sexual signification, but only to relinquish strict dichotomies in the final analysis. The *heimliche* can be seen to link to the maternal and the *unheimliche* to the paternal principle, but Cixous has already clarified that the circulation of the *unheimliche* and *heimliche* through each other evoke "the figure of the androgyne. The word joins itself, again, and the *Heimliche* and *Unheimliche* pair off."¹²⁸ Sound as it may as the perfect union of the

¹²⁴ Cixous 1976: 533.

¹²⁵ Cixous 1976: 535.

¹²⁶ Freud 1953: 231.

¹²⁷ Cixous 1976:538-9.

¹²⁸ Cixous 1976: 530.

(re)productive principle—an orgasmic ‘little death’ as it were—“[w]hy is it that the maternal landscape, the *heimisch*, and the familiar become so disquieting?” Cixous holds that it is precisely the absence of any separation, the obliteration of limits in the realisation of our desires and in the accomplishments of our goals that form the key to understanding this paradox. She writes, “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.”¹²⁹ In other words, death is the metaphor that tells us that a blurring of opposed principles has been brought about, so the birth of the new is in death.

This gendered reading brings us back into contact with Freud’s interpretation of the uncanny double as the harbinger of death, because “as a *changing* sign, [the uncanny] passes from the affirmation of survival to the announcement of death.” However, it also produces the figure of the un-dead double as a “ghostly figure of nonfulfillment and repression, and not the double as counterpart or reflection, but rather the doll that is neither dead nor alive.”¹³⁰ This is so because, in Cixous’ account, 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.¹³¹

And here the newness, the objective of Cixous’ research into the uncanny, resides: its conceptual liminality opens up into the broad sway of a liberating non-signification—beyond representation, it becomes the sign that does not signify. More accurately, the literary representation of the uncanny, the ghost, is, contradictorily, a most tangible non-

¹²⁹ Cixous 1976: 544-5.

¹³⁰ Cixous 1976: 539-40. The “doll” is an oblique reference to the automaton Olympia in Hoffman’s tale with which (or whom) the male protagonist, Nathaniel, falls in love. Tellingly, the Freudian account diminishes the importance of this uncanny ‘female’ character to favour the Sand-Man’s, but is recovered in Cixous’ interpretation.

¹³¹ Cixous 1976: 542-3.

sign: ghosts do not exist outside fiction, but as fiction is just “another form of reality,”¹³² it touches upon the real. As such, ghosts are the uncanny un-dead and mediate between life and death, between representation and non-representation. Cixous argues that, poised between life and death, “[w]hat 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.”¹³³

This takes her to a definition of the character of fiction, which she sees as undeniably and ambiguously linked to reality as the uncanny to the homely (and as death to life, one might argue): “[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 Cixoux’ view, it is literature itself that represents the uncanny. It is a realm of non-signification in which nothing is fixed, a repository of as yet unrealised possibilities that may therefore question as well as alter factual realities—not unlike Alan Sinfield’s notion of literature as a “particularising pattern laid across the grid of (changing) social possibilities.”¹³⁴ Thus, Cixous claims that:

[t]he true secret of fiction rests somewhere else. Fiction, through the invention of *new* forms of *Unheimliche*, is *the very strange thing*: if one considers the *Unheimliche* as a fork of which one branch points in the direction of an anxiety, one sees, at the extreme end of the uncanny, fiction pointing towards the unknown: what is newest in the new, through which it in part is linked with death.¹³⁵

The significance of Cixous’ analysis is that literature may become the uncanny instrument that fills out reality with experimentation in the realm of identity, a blurring of fixities hitherto assumed as certain and unmovable strongly mapping across redefinitions of gender. As Cixous concludes herself, “[n]either real nor fictitious, ‘fiction’ is ... an anticipation of *nonrepresentation*, a doll, a hybrid body composed of language and silence that ... invents doubles, and death.”¹³⁶ One should conclude that, in such a view,

¹³² Cixous 1976: 546.

¹³³ Cixous 1976: 543.

¹³⁴ Sinfield 1983: 3-4. See also chapter 1 of this dissertation.

¹³⁵ Cixous 1976: 547.

¹³⁶ Cixous 1976: 548 (my emphasis).

death is never the end but always linked to life, as much as the orgasmic ‘little death’ is to life’s creation. Death *produces* new beginnings, giving way to other ways of being; hence, identities change in the flux of life and death.

2.2. Postcolonial Sources of the Uncanny

The death of colonialism may give way to postcolonial constructs that, writing back from the margins, can help to redefine 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 (post-war, post-independence etc.), with a blurring effect on differential spatio-temporalities, and with an undermining of anti-neocolonial agencies. In the final analysis:

[t]he 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.¹³⁷

As the postcolonial is never a fully hyphenated *post*-colonial, indicative of the complete demise of colonialism, the term’s ambiguity firmly links it to manifestations of the uncanny, turning the latter into both a signpost and tool in the *postcolonising*¹³⁸ process of rewriting national identities.

Not surprisingly, then, the uncanny manifests itself in the work of distinguished critics and theorists writing on postcolonial identity-building. In the late 1970s Edward Said published *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, a seminal study in the field of postcolonialism; in this work, some conditions in which the uncanny may be activated can already be discerned. His study is all the more significant since a prime focus of identitarian discomfort in the contemporary West—as addressed in chapter 1

¹³⁷ Shohat 1992: 101-5.

¹³⁸ Cf. Aileen Moreton-Robinson 2003: 30.

regarding Dutch society—relates to ‘Western conceptions of the Orient’ and especially to the place of Islam in it. Said’s project draws the literary into the political: “Too often literature and culture are presumed to be politically, even historically innocent; it has regularly seemed otherwise to me, and certainly my study of Orientalism has convinced me ... that society and literary culture can only be understood and studied together.”¹³⁹ Drawing on the theoretical work of the French philosopher Michel Foucault regarding the essentially political nature of the production of knowledge in Western society, Said’s main contention is that the 19th and 20th century European academic practice of studying Oriental cultures developed as a colonial *discourse* aimed at assimilating cultural difference with the Orient into the colonizer’s framework of knowledge, and at taking control of the newly conquered domains. What he denominates *Orientalism* is essentially “a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient’s special place in European Western experience;”¹⁴⁰ it draws on the European invention and production of the Orient as “a place of romance, exotic beings, haunted memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences.”¹⁴¹ He adds that it 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.” Furthermore, *Orientalism* has still not disappeared as an academic discourse in post-colonial times.¹⁴² Essentially, Said’s thesis is that a national identity and sense of self is always the product of a relationship with other cultures or the Other. In what he denominates the construction of the Other, the definition of Self and Other is negotiated in terms of power. Building from a psychological metaphor that Freud uses to exemplify his analysis of the uncanny, he holds that:

... the development and maintenance of every culture require the existence of another different and competing *alter ego*. The construction of identity—for identity, whether of Orient or Occident, France or Britain, while obviously a repository of distinct collective experiences, is finally a construction—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,

¹³⁹ Said 1995: 27.

¹⁴⁰ Said 1991: 1.

¹⁴¹ Said 1995: 2.

¹⁴² Said 1995: 12.

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.¹⁴³

Said addressed his analysis to the study of what is commonly called the Near and Middle East. While his geo-cultural focus remains appropriate for an analysis of the identity problems encountered on the contemporary European firmament, the scope of his study has also been successfully expanded to other areas of European colonial settlement. Australia, with an Indigenous population, is no exception, as Hodge and Mishra’s coining of *Aboriginalism* testifies¹⁴⁴. Following Said’s line of thought one may claim that Universalist—that is, essentialist, positivist, realist and liberal-humanist—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 within its own cultural specificity, it becomes disruptive to the Western mind, defamiliarising known models of interpretation and consequently generating uncanny effects. Thus, to use François Lyotard’s analysis of the postmodern condition, the *Western Grand Narrative* must give way to *micro-narratives* of a local kind.¹⁴⁵

Said’s account brings us back to the Freudian uncanny, which, as we have seen, Cixous deconstructs in terms of gender by a re-interpretation of oedipal fears. Freud had already looked into the matter of incest in a volume entitled *Totem and Taboo* (1918), published just one year before “The Uncanny”. Surprisingly, in this study Freud looks into the matter of incest basing his findings on contemporary anthropological descriptions of the Aborigines, and therefore produces an exemplary piece of Aboriginalist scholarship. The following quote from the first essay, entitled “The Savage’s Fear of Incest,” is illustrative for its racially-determinist political agenda:

Primitive man is known to us by the stages of development through which he has passed ... Moreover, in a way he is still our contemporary: there are people whom we still consider more closely related to primitive man than ourselves ... We can thus judge the so-called savage and semi-savage races;

¹⁴³ Said 1995: 332.

¹⁴⁴ Hodge & Mishra: 1990: 27-30.

¹⁴⁵ Lyotard 1984: xxiii-iv.

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.¹⁴⁶

Freud is especially interested in totemism and its relationship with taboo. He describes totems as animals, plants or natural phenomena “which [stand] in a peculiar relationship to the clan,” and underpin and stratify Aboriginal religious and social organisation by individual assignment to clan members through the paternal and maternal line.¹⁴⁷ Related to the law, the sacred, the unclean and fear, totems also intimately link to taboos that impose prohibitions on certain forms of social conduct, notably endogamy. And the latter brings Freud to the main target of his study, so obscured and unfathomable in Western society that it needs to be illuminated from a pristine outside perspective:

... we must consider that peculiarity of the totemic system which attracts the interest of the psychoanalyst. Almost everywhere where the totem prevails there also exists the law that *the members of the same totem are not allowed to enter into sexual relations with each other; that is, that they cannot marry each other.*¹⁴⁸

Thus, endogamy becomes defined as sexual intercourse with members of one’s totemic kin, which equals the Western concept of incest because “[e]verybody 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.”¹⁴⁹ In *Totem and Taboo*, then, Freud:

¹⁴⁶ Freud 1998: 1 (my emphasis). Incidentally, the choice of the term “youngest continent” seems in contradiction to the argument on the archaic and backwardness developed in this excerpt; ‘young’ must undoubtedly refer to Australia’s recent ‘discovery’ by European civilisation, an ethnocentrism of sorts highlighted by the contrasted longevity of Aboriginal cultures (40 to 50,000 years).

¹⁴⁷ Freud 1998: 2.

¹⁴⁸ Freud 1998: 3 (Freud’s emphasis).

¹⁴⁹ Freud 1998: 4.

... wants to show that the injunction not to kill the totem animal, interpreted as a displacement for the father, and the rule not to marry within the group, are respectively, negations of the two great oedipal wishes, to kill one's father [assuming a male ego here] and 'marry' one's mother. *The institution of society thus rests on the measures taken to suppress the wishes of the Oedipus complex.*¹⁵⁰

The uncanny would obtain, then, if the repressed Oedipal wish were to resurface, coming to light as that which should have remained hidden. In terms of the management of the incest drive in 'primitive' societies, Freud mentions that violation of the incest taboo was, at the time of writing, punishable with a death sentence at the hands of the entire Aboriginal clan.¹⁵¹

How, then, do Freud's ethnological findings feed back into the Oedipus complex and the (already gendered) account of the uncanny? In the concluding paragraph of "The Savage's Fear of Incest", he argues as follows:

What we can add to the further appreciation of the incest dread is the statement that it is subtle infantile trait and is in striking agreement with the psychic life of the neurotic. 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 returned to them (inhibited development and regression) ... 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 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

¹⁵⁰ Paul 1996: 274 (my emphasis).

¹⁵¹ Freud 1998: 5.

former incest wishes, which have since succumbed to repression. *It is therefore of importance to us to be able to show that that man's incest wishes, which later are destined to become unconscious, are still felt to be dangerous by savage races who consider worthy of the most severe defensive measures.*¹⁵²

Taking as our point of departure the importance of the oedipal narrative in Freud's elaboration of the uncanny, several conclusions can be drawn. First of all, Freud's reference to Otto Rank is revelatory, because the latter's investigations into the use of the double and the importance of the incest theme to literary work will later form the backbone of Freud's analysis of the uncanny.¹⁵³ Secondly, in an Aboriginalist attempt to make Native Australian cultures knowable and meaningful to the West, Freud uses anthropological knowledge to underpin his psychoanalytical theory of the Oedipus complex. Thus, Freud would come to consider the management of the incest wish as the essence of all human art 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.¹⁵⁴

Freud's interest in Aboriginal cultures is given by a specific problematic he encounters in his Viennese psychiatric practice. In order to reach solutions he draws on second-hand ethnological knowledge (he never visits Australia) and constructs a 'modern' theory about the Western European psyche in opposition to 'primitive' Australia. In other words, he defines the European Self against the Antipodean Other. Thirdly, 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 emotions: they still openly recognize, prohibit and fear the

¹⁵² Freud 1998: 15 (my emphasis).

¹⁵³ See Freud 1953: 234-5.

¹⁵⁴ Freud 1998: 134 (my emphasis).

incest wish and implement capital punishment in retaliation, whereas Westerners are supposed to have overcome/repressed such feelings in their normal development. In Western society the incest wish is presumably obscured but may uncannily 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.¹⁵⁵ 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 manoeuvre confirms the hegemony of Eurocentred thought, which celebrates its Universalist modernity against the underdeveloped primitive, thus celebrating and justifying its civilising impulse through the constitution of Empire. Lastly, Freud’s analysis of incest in *Totem and Taboo* is profoundly male-biased: it is the boy/man who entertains the incestuous wish, while his mother and sister(s) remain the passive objects of his desire. What is more, *Totem and Taboo* does not only bend the possibilities for a Freudian analysis of the uncanny across gender, as we have seen with Hélène Cixous, but also across race by linking the ‘primitive’ (the savage, the unconscious, the repressed) to the ethnic. It is foremost in this racialist aspect—‘racial psychology’—that the structural link between oedipal blindness, castration and death is substantiated, the punishment for incest amongst Aborigines being the capital penalty.

So if the uncanny alternatives for individual signification are also 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.”¹⁵⁶ He takes a step towards 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 to fill the gaps by narration rather than remembrance, which confers a(n imagined) sense of identity to a

¹⁵⁵ Therese Carter 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” (1998-9).

¹⁵⁶ Anderson 1991: 6-7 (my emphasis). 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.” Incidentally, the concept of comradeship homes in on the notion of male ‘mateship’ in Australian identity.

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.’¹⁵⁷

The Australian historian Bain Attwood takes his cue and writes that “[i]dentities 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 back on Said’s thought by adding that “[n]ationality is forged only by reference to an other, which it also constructs.”¹⁵⁸

Introducing *Nation and Narration*, the postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha takes the construction of Self and Other within the framework of postcolonial nationhood and identity into the terrain of uncanny estrangement:

... a particular ambivalence ... haunts the idea of the nation, the language of those who write of it and the lives of those who live it. It is an ambivalence that emerges from a growing awareness that, despite the certainty with which historians speak of the ‘origins’ of the nation as a sign of the ‘modernity’ of society, the cultural temporality of the nation inscribes a much more transitional social reality ... If the ambivalent figure of the nation is a problem of its transitional history, its conceptual indeterminacy, its wavering between vocabularies, then what effect does this have on narratives and discourses that signify a sense of ‘nationness’: the *heimlich* pleasures of the hearth, the *unheimlich* terror of the space or race of the Other; the comfort of social belonging ...¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁷ Anderson 1991: 204-5.

¹⁵⁸ Attwood 1996: xxiii.

¹⁵⁹ Bhabha 1990a: 1,2.

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 manoeuvres are the necessary signs of a nation’s openness to difference:

Counter-narratives of the nation that continually evoke and erase its totalising boundaries—both actual and conceptual—disturb those ideological manoeuvres through which ‘imagined communities’ are given essentialist identities. For the political unity of the nation consists in a continual displacement of its irredeemably plural modern space, bounded by different, even hostile nations into a signifying space that is archaic and mythical, paradoxically representing the nation’s modern territoriality, in the patriotic, atavistic temporality of Traditionalism.¹⁶⁰

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 national 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 does not only take place *without* but also *within* territorial boundaries, as exemplified in the cases of immigrant and Native/non-Native political conflict. 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”.¹⁶¹

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 nation’s ‘modern’ concept of territoriality is, in reality, returned as atavistic primitivism. Within a postcolonial framework, the psychological uncanny can be given a socio-political dimension when so-called ‘primitive’, i.e. socio-politically repressed notions of identity are liberated and

¹⁶⁰ Bhabha 1990b: 300.

¹⁶¹ Bhabha 1990a: 4.

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. What Bhabha calls:

[t]he liminal point of this ideological displacement is the turning of the differentiated spatial boundary, the ‘outside’, into the unified temporal territory of Tradition. Freud’s concept of the “narcissism of minor differences”¹⁶²—reinterpreted for our purposes—provides 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 ... The problem is, of course, that the ambivalent identifications occupy the same psychic space; and paranoid projections ‘outwards’ return to haunt and split the space from which they are made. So long as a firm boundary is maintained between the territories ... the aggressivity will be projected onto the Other or the Outside.¹⁶³

But 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:

[i]t is in this space of liminality, in the ‘unbearable collapse of certainty’ that we encounter once again the narcissistic neuroses of the national discourse with which I began. The nation is no longer the sign of modernity under which cultural differences are homogenized in the ‘horizontal’ view of society. The nation reveals, in its ambivalent and vacillating representation,

162 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” (Freud 1961: 114).

¹⁶³ Bhabha 1990b: 300.

the ethnography of its own historicity and opens up the possibility for narratives of the people and their difference ... 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.*¹⁶⁴

Thus, Bhabha points out that there is an uncanny reversal at work in top-down conceptions of national identity which resides in its stifling homogenisation. It is an impossible oneness that is marketed while 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.¹⁶⁵ The key lies in the liminality of the nation space, a feature already encountered in the uncanny by Cixous, which may open up spaces of alternative representations. Bhabha holds that "[f]rom *Discipline and Punish*¹⁶⁶ we have learned that the most individuated are those subjects who are placed on the margins of the social ... 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."¹⁶⁷ Bhabha concludes "suggest[ing] no salvation, but *a strange cultural survival* of the people. For it is by living on the borderline of history and language, on the limits of race and gender, that we are in a position to translate the differences between them into a kind of solidarity."¹⁶⁸ This is tantamount to the celebration of cultural plurality and difference.

In this 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 higher class background, we can understand race, gender *and* class to operate in the crucible of the *psychological* uncanny. But why does Homi Bhabha not assign equal importance to the vicissitudes of the lower classes in *social/postcolonial* manifestations of the uncanny?

¹⁶⁴ Bhabha 1990b: 300-1 (my emphasis).

¹⁶⁵ Bhabha 1990b: 315.

¹⁶⁶ Michel Foucault's study (1975) focuses on the great changes in the penal systems of the Western world in the Modern Age. Incidentally, Australia started out as a penal colony.

¹⁶⁷ Bhabha 1990b: 302.

¹⁶⁸ Bhabha 1990b: 320 (my emphasis).

Certainly, the (formerly) colonized and women could be defined as social underclasses, as issues of race and gender translate in limitations on access to the economic means of production. Indeed, according to Benedict Anderson, racism is originally inspired by class ideologies, especially by “claims to divinity among rulers and to ‘blue’ or ‘white’ blood and ‘breeding’ among aristocracies,”¹⁶⁹ 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: “[i]f, 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: *postcolonising* contexts—class divisions are perpetuated in an exploitative neo-colonial 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 ... [T]hose most separated from any possibility of an alliance among “women, prisoners, conscripted soldiers, hospital patients, and homosexuals” ... are the females of the urban subproletariat ... [T]he subject of exploitation cannot know and speak the text of female exploitation ... The woman is doubly in the shadow.¹⁷⁰

Nevertheless, Spivak embeds her analysis within a framework of First/Third-World relations, in which the White-settler colony Australia is ambiguously located, as the following discussion of Australianness may illustrate. Its (post)colonial histories of oppression and their uncanny entanglements may operate in a complex bind in which race and gender acquire higher profile than class considerations.

¹⁶⁹ Anderson 1991: 150.

¹⁷⁰ Spivak 1988: 287-8.

2.3. Sources of the Postcolonial Australian Uncanny

2.3.1. Whiteness as Australianness

In a study with the illustrative title *The Long, Slow Death of White Australia* (2005), Gwenda Tavan analyses how the official White Australia policy aimed to keep Australia 'White' and how its Social-Darwinism and racial determinism have not yet disappeared from the Australian political scene in the new millennium.¹⁷¹ Similarly, Ien Ang's discussion of White Australian reactions towards the new age of mass immigration, decolonisation and globalisation, echoes Homi Bhabha's "*unheimlich* terror of the space or race of the Other"¹⁷² 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."¹⁷³ 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 directly within the psychological and social parameters of the uncanny. So how does the uncanny operate within, affect and reconfigure contemporary Australian identity, both individual and collective? How does the uncanny postcolonise Australianness? An analysis is due of what it has meant to be Australian.

It is noteworthy that Benedict Anderson sees nationalism—and national identity by extension—starting in the colonies rather than the Metropole as part of securing the Imperial project,¹⁷⁴ and this says something about the amount of feeling invested in Australianness. Traditional notions of the Australian nation state and Australian national identity are built upon a contradictory relationship with British Imperialism. Crucially, its founding took place as a penal Crown colony with the arrival of the First Fleet in Sydney Cove on the 26th of 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 the 1st of January 1901, with the founding of the Commonwealth which federated the 6 states of

¹⁷¹ See Tavan 2005.

¹⁷² Bhabha 1990a: 1.

¹⁷³ Ang 2003: 53, my emphasis.

¹⁷⁴ Anderson 1991: 163-4. Anderson points out how such 19th c. 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.

Australia into a British dominion.¹⁷⁵ Not surprisingly, 1901 also sees the first implementation of the White Australia policy, in an effort to keep non-European immigration out, coinciding with legislation to curb the Native presence in the island-continent even further.¹⁷⁶ The structural link with British Imperialism as 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 both victim and exponent 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 Aboriginal 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.¹⁷⁷

It should come as no surprise then that 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 necessarily displays "characteristic amnesias" to be effectively established.¹⁷⁸ On the one hand, it is imbued with the strong egalitarian philosophy encapsulated in the *bush myth*.¹⁷⁹ This serves to counter the class inequalities inherent in a colonisation process drawing on a prison population, and to accommodate these descendants of the metropolitan rejects of British 19th century 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 a Native vision to the inexperienced eye and ear, the Australian Bush or Outback in the national stereotype is not the

¹⁷⁵ 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 defence.

¹⁷⁶ 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 *Bringing Them Home Report* 1997).

¹⁷⁷ Hodge & Mishra 1991: xiii.

¹⁷⁸ Anderson 1991: 7, 205.

¹⁷⁹ An egalitarian and anti-authoritarian philosophy of mateship among resourceful independent white males living in the Australian bush (See Works Cited: "The Australian Bush").

domain of the Aboriginal peoples but of racism and male chauvinism, uncannily overridden by a levelling of class differences—the ‘excess’ of one obscures the O/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.”¹⁸⁰

How intensely the latter must have taken place is shown in the fact that British Colonial Office policy was strongly influenced by the humanitarianism of the anti-slavery campaigns in the early 19th century. For the first half of the 19th century it tried to develop a protectionist programme for the Natives, but the great distance to the Metropole was not conducive to its implementation. Starting from the premise that large areas of Australia were ‘unoccupied’ and open to sale and colonisation, local colonial officials and White settlers often interpreted these measures, such as specific legislation to protect the Natives’ land rights and the appointment of official protectors, to suit an agenda of unequivocal Native dispossession and extermination.¹⁸¹

Thus, the configuration of Australianness took place in a double bind of disobedience and aggression:

... the treatment of Aboriginal people was not simply a matter of pure racism, but ... this brutal activity also had the effect of clearly differentiating white colonists from the ‘mother country’, thus helping to generate a new form of national identity. As a result, 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.¹⁸²

¹⁸⁰ Caiter 1998-9. One can usefully add Benedict Anderson’s arguments on postcolonial racism to this, who writes that “[w]here 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” (Anderson 1991: 150).

¹⁸¹ Cf. Reynolds 2003: chapters 4-8. Henry Reynolds is Australia’s leading specialist in the New Australian History (Attwood 1996: xv).

¹⁸² John Hartley quoted in Batty 1998.

Typically and (pre)dominantly inhabited by the “bushranger”, defined as a “Caucasian adult male [and] itinerant rural worker of no fixed address[, h]is values and forms of language and thought are widely claimed to represent Australian authenticity, as a touchstone of Australian identity.”¹⁸³ Whereas class is subsumed in this articulation of Australian identity as White male Anglo-Celtic, its legitimacy is built on an uncanny void or gap which can only be filled by incorporating the ethnic, the female and foremost the Indigenous. Thus, the injustice of penal transportation from Britain primarily mapped across class by displacing an impoverished metropolitan population. This gave way to a Euro-centred male egalitarianism—‘mateship’—which obscured not only the oppression of the Indigenous population, but also (to a lesser extent) women and non-Anglo-Celtic immigrants on Australian soil. The Aboriginal scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson could therefore write that “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.”¹⁸⁴

Although the stereotypical character of the bushranger has left a heavy imprint on Australian culture, it has never represented the urban mainstream, which takes up larger and larger proportions of the total Australian population everyday. Thus the bushranger articulates a double myth; by unjust exclusions and by a romantic nostalgia for an irrecoverable British male settler past, it “encodes a class, race and gender identity which classifies women, Aborigines and new migrants as ‘unAustralian.’”¹⁸⁵ More exactly perhaps, the presumed class equality in Australian national identity may serve to obscure the absence of Native, ethnic and female voices, and feeds into Homi Bhabha’s focus on race and gender in postcolonising redefinitions of Self and Other. In a comparative analysis, Sneja Gunew defines multiculturalisms as both “a set of government policies designed to manage cultural diversity” and “an attempt by various groups and individuals to use these policies to achieve full participatory cultural democracy.”¹⁸⁶ She holds that:

... interrogations of the national emerge from both local communities and global diasporas. They can have outcomes as murderous as those of the old nationalisms but at the same time a retreat into nostalgias for some putative

¹⁸³ Hodge & Mishra 1991: xv.

¹⁸⁴ Moreton-Robinson 2003: 66. Her conference paper was given in 1999 at the University of Technology, Sydney.

¹⁸⁵ Hodge & Mishra 1991: xv.

¹⁸⁶ Gunew 2004: 5.

lost coherence of the nation does not appear to be an answer. Nor does the imposition of binary oppositions that trivialize the interactions of complex and non-homogeneous groups, reducing them to ‘black and white,’ seem to be the solution. 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.¹⁸⁷

This changeability and elusiveness suggest that, whereas the imposition of Aboriginality as a category is by no means the objective of this study, it can be strategically used to interrogate the exclusive definitions that underpin the mechanics of racial/ethnic and gender discrimination in the Australian context, in an overlap with class. One way to question the certainties of the bush myth is to draw on “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.”¹⁸⁸

2.3.2. Aboriginality

Recent political developments regarding Indigenous Australians make a reappraisal of mainstream notions of Australianness possible. In their 1998 study *Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity in a Postcolonial Nation*, the Cultural Studies scholars Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs assign the uncanny an active and productive role in recent Australian politics, sociology and cultural production by structurally linking it to a postmodern notion of uncertainty towards identity. More specifically, they locate the appearance of the uncanny in the awkward fit of the Native segment of the population into Australian society.¹⁸⁹ Not surprisingly Sneja Gunew qualifies the latter issue in psychological terms and calls it “vexed”¹⁹⁰, and Bain Attwood writes that in recent years “‘The Aboriginal’ or Aboriginality has become central to the defining of Australian

¹⁸⁷ Gunew 2004: 29.

¹⁸⁸ Hodge & Mishra 1991: 24.

¹⁸⁹ Gelder & Jacobs 1998: xiv.

¹⁹⁰ Gunew 1990: 100.

nationhood and identity to an unprecedented degree.”¹⁹¹ Similarly, Gelder and Jacobs point out that the postcolonial redefinition of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relationships becomes one of the main causes of postcolonial identity problems in contemporary Australia; this redefinition is grounded in the recent legal changes around Aboriginality, which have endowed the Natives with the legally endorsed possibility to retrieve lands they had lost in the process of White colonisation.¹⁹²

From 1992 onwards, such court rulings as the Mabo Judgment of 1992 and the Wik Decision of 1996, together with the implementation of the Native Title Act of 1993, have opened up ways for Native Australians to reclaim ancestral lands from non-Native settlers. In the case of *Eddie Mabo v. the State of Queensland* (1992),¹⁹³ the Australian High Court declared that the common law of Australia recognised Native title,¹⁹⁴ acknowledging the legitimacy of Indigenous property rights in Australia, and ruling that “in accordance with the Racial Discrimination Act 1975, ... native title must be treated equally before the law with other titles that flow from the Crown.” While this unequivocal statement may have been a major victory, it fleshed out ambiguously in the Native Title Act. This law stipulated a series of conditions under which Native title may not only be upheld but also extinguished, putting the responsibility for validation or authentication of these rights on Indigenous Australians. The Mabo Judgment assumed that Native title rights could only apply to vacant Crown land, that is to say, land that the State had not expropriated. Indeed, under Common Law, “[b]y exercising those sovereign powers known as eminent domain, the Crown could take the land of the subject *but it could only do so with the consent of the owner and payment of adequate compensation.*”¹⁹⁵ Thus, the issue became what would happen to all that land the Crown had taken without due Native consent and compensation, now mostly given to and occupied by settlers descended from Europeans. The most important instance of such conflicting interests arose with regard to pastoral leases. As historian Henry Reynolds explains, these:

¹⁹¹ Attwood 1996: xxiii.

¹⁹² Gelder & Jacobs 1998: 135.

¹⁹³ 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 recognised by the Australian High Court.

¹⁹⁴ “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” (Povinelli 1998: 579, footnote 13).

¹⁹⁵ Reynolds 2003: 48-9 (my emphasis).

... are one of the most common forms of land tenure in Australia ... they have been a feature of the pastoral industry since the middle of the nineteenth century. At the time of the Wik judgement there were 170000 pastoral leases occupying 42 per cent of the country. Many covered marginal country with low carrying capacity but others provide access to prime grazing land. Some families had been on the same country for several generations and, not unreasonably, thought the land in question belonged to them. They had reasons to think they were immune from any native title claims. In the Mabo judgement the High Court had determined that the Crown had always been able to extinguish native title and had so when granting a legal interest in land inconsistent with it. Both a freehold title and a lease would have this effect.¹⁹⁶

The 1996 Wik Judgement, involving Native claims to land occupied by White pastoralists in the state of Queensland,¹⁹⁷ gave further impetus to this ambiguity by ruling that “native title may survive on a pastoral lease if there was no clear intention to extinguish native title when the lease was granted,” but that Native title cannot take away pastoralists’ rights under the terms of their existing leases. Basically, the legal problem consisted in the origins of pastoral leases: they had been given by royal statute so as to offer some kind of security to pastoralists without jeopardising unforeseeable future uses of the land; they therefore lack the power to extinguish Native title which a Common Law freehold title as a more absolute form of ownership would have conferred.¹⁹⁸ Therefore, the complexity of the legal parameters involved in pastoral leases means that Native title claims can only be considered on a tedious, conflictive “case-by-case basis.”¹⁹⁹ Nevertheless, within the new legislation claims of Native title still have a chance to prosper when Aboriginal belonging can be validated through a “recurrent pattern of physical presence on the land,”²⁰⁰ normally understood as a sense of sacredness around a site which links Aboriginal cosmogony to local land features.

Sacred knowledge concerning the land, of vital importance in maintaining tribal laws, customs and ownership of the land, differs completely from Western concepts of

¹⁹⁶ Reynolds 2003: 213.

¹⁹⁷ “[T]he Wik and Thayorre people of Western Cape York sought a declaration of their native title rights over their traditional land, two parcels of which had been embodied in pastoral leases.” While the Federal Court ruled against their claims, the High Court overturned the latter decision (Reynolds 2003: 214).

¹⁹⁸ Reynolds 2003: 214-18.

¹⁹⁹ See Works Cited: “Native Title”.

²⁰⁰ Falck Borch 1992: 11.

presence, property and inheritance. Precisely their incommensurability is the uncanny difficulty that Australian law courts and mainstream society have had to deal with in recent years. Native succession is based on the Dreamtime beliefs or Dreamings,²⁰¹ a series of origin stories that explain how in a distant past the Aboriginal Totemic Ancestors gave shape to the elements, the land, and all forms of life, organizing all into an unchanging, interconnected and interdependent network that Aboriginal peoples are required to care for and guard. 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 acquired sacred qualities and, within tribal logic, are not to be visited without due preparation and authorisation. Within the Native framework of thinking, 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.²⁰² But as Dreamtime knowledge can only be obtained after due initiation, it is enveloped in protective layers of silence and secrecy; therefore, in court these taboo matters may not be easily spoken about, which heightens the effect of incommensurability between Native and Common Law. Special court conditions must be created in order to make a proper, 'closed' hearing possible in which ongoing Native presence on and ownership of the land may be validated. Thus, Gelder and Jacobs write that "the totemic function of the sacred ... is both undeniable and problematic because it is an intangible thing that nevertheless must be talked about," so "[c]ontemporary legal and policy provisions have ... attempted to accommodate the protocols of secrecy associated with Aboriginal sacred sites."²⁰³

In 1992, the creation of the first legal grounds and provisions that enabled Native title cases to prosper leads Merete Falck Borch to the somewhat optimistic conclusion that:

The [Mabo] case has not resolved all the problems facing Aborigines and Islanders trying to recover the land they have lost; however, there is little doubt that the rejection by the High Court of some of the long-lived fictions which have justified the dispossession of these peoples will be of great

²⁰¹ Falck Borch 1992: 3.

²⁰² This section on the Dreamtime mythology has been elaborated using the *The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture* edited by Sylvia Kleinert and Margo Neale (2000): 40-59.

²⁰³ Gelder & Jacobs 1998: 101, 117-8.

significance in the future development of relations between the indigenous population and the rest of the Australian population.²⁰⁴

Nevertheless, the ambiguities encapsulated in the 1993 Native Title Act and the 1996 Wik Decision were less promising. In 1998, Philip Batty argues that:

... the High Court decision was made, to a large extent, to mitigate against Australia's international embarrassment at the continuing decrepitude of Aboriginal 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.²⁰⁵

Kent McNeil, a non-Native specialist in Indigenous land rights, gives Batty's doubts ample foundations. In an important essay entitled "Racial Discrimination and Unilateral Extinguishment of Native Title", published in 1996, he takes issue with the new legislation's favourable treatment of state over Indigenous land rights:

[N]ative title c[an] be extinguished by unilateral executive action without legal obligation to pay ... Clear and plain statutory authority apart, the Crown simply does not have the power to extinguish legal rights to land, except for purposes in time of war, in which case compensation must be paid ... Were the law otherwise private rights would be exposed to arbitrary executive action ... [T]he majority [of High Court judges] in Mabo [1992] chose not to apply [the latter norm] to Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. In doing so, the Court treated indigenous people differently from other Australians ... This is clearly *discriminatory*.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁴ Falck Borch 1992: 11.

²⁰⁵ Batty 1998.

²⁰⁶ Quoted in Henry Reynolds 2003: 237-8 (my emphasis). The original essay appeared in *Australian Indigenous Law Reporter* 45 (1996).

McNeil clarifies that Common Law protects private property rights from the abuse of state power, but that this principle is not recognised in the new Native title legislation, thus discriminating Aborigines and Torres Straight Islanders.

Later developments confirmed the correctness of this view. In 1998, the conservative Howard government passed the Native Title Amendment Act, commonly known as the “Ten Point Plan”, which placed further restrictions on Native land claims. Indeed, one legal source holds that “[t]hese amendments made the Native Title Act more complicated, increased the number of procedural requirements that native title claimants had to meet and cut back the tenures over which a native title claim could be made.”²⁰⁷ Thus, nowadays Native euphoria and non-Native hysteria over the legal implications of Native title legislation has diminished as current legislation has turned into a double-edged sword; in merely allowing partial victories on a postcolonial battlefield that not so long ago only knew White winners and Indigenous losers, Australian Common Law not only offers the possibility to enforce Native title, but it fixes the conditions for its extinction as well.²⁰⁸ In 1994, the Aboriginal scholar and novelist Fabienne Bayet-Charlton already expressed her disappointment that:

²⁰⁷ See Works Cited: “The Native Title Act and the 10-Point Plan”, published by the *Australasian Legal Information Institute*. This legal institution, a joint facility of the University of Technology of Sydney (UTS) and the University of New South Wales (UNSW) Faculties of Law, further explains that:

The 10-point plan incorporated many of the amendments that had been introduced in the earlier bills and imposed additional restrictions on the scope of native title. The government wanted to amend the Native Title Act to:

- 1 validate invalid acts creating non-Indigenous interests in land between 1 January 1994 and 23 December 1996;
- 2 empower the States and Territories to extinguish native title over non-freehold lands subject to various interests deemed to confer the right of exclusive possession on the interest-holder;
- 3 extinguish native title over land required for the provision of services to the public;
- 4 extinguish native title where there was any inconsistency with interests created by pastoral leases, including compulsory acquisition of native title to upgrade “exclusive” leases;
- 5 create legislation regulating Indigenous peoples’ access to lands for traditional purposes;
- 6 impose the registration test before claimants could exercise the right to negotiate ... and remove it altogether in relation to mining exploration activities and limit it by allowing only one “negotiation” per project;
- 7 remove the right to negotiate when a future act relates to compulsory acquisition for the construction of government-type infrastructure, restrict the right to negotiate in relation to land in and around towns and cities, and expand the activities that pastoralists could do on their leases without negotiating;
- 8 permit governments to do acts to regulate and manage water, sea and airspace without negotiating;
- 9 impose a higher registration test, require all native title claims to be filed within six years of the passage of the amendments and require all claims to be processed more quickly;
- 10 provide for binding local agreements (Indigenous Land Use Agreements) and regional agreements about the coexistence of Indigenous and non-Indigenous interests in land.”

²⁰⁸ Wolfe 2000: 142.

... native title legislation has been ... watered down from its original intentions, and ... 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.²⁰⁹

And Henry Reynolds' conclusion, ten years later, is in agreement:

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 1992.²¹⁰

Nevertheless, what is nowadays seen as the relatively limited legal scope of the Mabo decision caused a great psychological impact in Australian society which should not be underestimated. Mabo offered an opportunity to come to terms with the great injustice inflicted upon the Natives over two centuries of (neo)colonial rule in its appeal to the status of Australia as a great, democratic nation, and provoked both acceptance and refusal. The American anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli picks up on Mabo's uncanny psychological effects when she describes:

... native title ... as *a fetish of national anxieties* about the status, role and future of the Australian nation and [this] helps explain 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

²⁰⁹ Bayet-Charlton 2003: 180. Originally published in *Social Alternatives* 13.2, July 1994.

²¹⁰ Reynolds 2003: 246.

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.²¹¹

Thus, Mabo led to a host of emotionally-charged reactions. Many non-Native Australians took up its challenge and identified with the political agenda of the progressive Keating government—although observers like Povinelli, McNeil and Attwood would doubt its sincerity for its drive against Aboriginal sovereignty.²¹² In his famous Redfern speech, PM Paul Keating proclaimed:

We non-Aboriginal Australians should perhaps remind ourselves that Australia once reached out for us. Didn't Australia provide opportunity and care for the dispossessed Irish? The poor of Britain? The refugees from war and famine and persecution in the countries of Europe and Asia? 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 recognise that the problem starts with us non-Aboriginal Australians. It begins, I think, with the act of recognition. Recognition that it was we who did the dispossessing. We took the traditional lands and smashed the traditional way of life. We brought the disasters. The alcohol. We committed the murders. We took the children from their mothers. We practised discrimination and exclusion. It was our ignorance and our prejudice. And our failure to imagine these things being done to us. With some noble exceptions, we failed to make the most basic human response and enter into their hearts and minds. We failed to ask - how would I feel if this were done to me? As a consequence, we failed to see that what we were doing degraded all of us.²¹³

²¹¹ Povinelli 1998: 597 (my emphasis).

²¹² See Attwood 1996: xxxv.

²¹³ Keating 1992. The then Prime Minister of Australia, Paul Keating, gave a famous speech at Redfern Park in Sydney on 10 December 1992 to launch the International Year for the World's Indigenous People in Australia. Redfern is an inner city suburb of Sydney with a historically large Aboriginal population.

Others however, such as “federal and state ministers, leaders of commerce and industry, and prominent conservative intellectuals have railed against the Mabo and Wik decisions and the judges who made them ... The response has too often been grudging and legalistic.”²¹⁴ For better or for worse, then, Native title legislation has created not only material but also psychological pressure on what was once considered inalienably the White settler’s. This has caused non-Natives, especially in traditional economic strongholds such as the mining industry and pastoralism, to question the extent to which they might feel ‘at home’ in Australia.

The White settler’s negation/repression of the Aboriginal 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 is proven erroneous.²¹⁵ The 18th-century concept of *Terra Nullius* or “a land belonging to no one”²¹⁶ denied Aboriginal cultures human status and therefore legally conferred ownership of their land to White settlers for more than two centuries. The European construction of Aboriginality as ‘an absence or lack’ grew out of an Enlightenment vision of progress, which put the ‘savages’ at the bottom of the ladder of civilisation. Their ‘obvious incapacity’ to work the land and make it ‘more productive’ did away with any claims on landownership they might have entertained in European eyes, and “this attribution of progress to European possession of the land and to Aboriginal dispossession came to constitute the predominant and the most enduring rationalisation for British colonization.”²¹⁷ Apart from the “massive land-theft” perpetrated by British colonisers, it also led to genocidal policies, the denial of political representation for Aborigines, the non-inclusion of “full-blood” Natives in the national census up to 1971, their exclusion from official history, and nuclear testing on Aboriginal land in the 1950s amongst others. Although Australia “pride[s] itself on its democratic, *egalitarian* tradition,” these gross violations of human rights “testify to the inability—if

²¹⁴ 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” (Reynolds 2003: 247-8).

²¹⁵ Collingwood-Whittick 2000: 113.

²¹⁶ Reynolds 2003: 14. 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” (2003: 15).

²¹⁷ Attwood 1996: viii-x.

not stubborn and cynical refusal—of the white community to integrate the existence of the Aborigine into its national representation.”²¹⁸

Nevertheless, the White Terra Nullius myth was overthrown with the implementation of the new 1990s legislation,²¹⁹ and the consequent re-appearance of the Aborigine on the Australian map brought about a new reality in which the colonial tables were turned. Despite the limitations of the new legislation, in this realm of unsettlement both place and identity could no longer be assigned according to European standards alone, thus dislocating White essentialist readings of Australia in an uncanny postcolonising reversal of settler primacy.²²⁰ Indeed, Australian multiculturalism—the mainstream, Anglo-Celtic-identified effort to cope with the tensions created by an increasingly culturally diverse nation—soon came under a strange kind of pressure which is only understandable from an underlying institutional agenda of disguised assimilation that clashed with the needs and demands of the Aboriginal population. Sneja Gunew already stated at the early beginning of the decade that:

[m]ulticulturalism 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 1988.²²¹

While the new Aborigine-inclusive multiculturalist tenets officially recognised that “complex as [Australian] contemporary identity is, it cannot be separated from Aboriginal Australia,”²²² its legal consequences generated discord in bringing to the fore the special minority status and rights of the Indigenous peoples, acknowledging their cultural *difference*. Therefore, putting the Aborigines back onto the Australian map was more than a simple metaphor; it was also an unsettling reality with disturbing consequences. As the Native segment of the population now possessed a legal means to reclaim parts of the *Terra Aboriginalis* lost under colonial rule, in an uncanny move the ideological bases of Australian multiculturalism were both confirmed and questioned: the

²¹⁸ Collingwood-Whittick 2000: 114 (my emphasis).

²¹⁹ Cf. Reynolds 2003: 212.

²²⁰ Gelder & Jacobs 1998: 135, 138.

²²¹ Gunew 1990: 112. 1988 was the year of the Bicentennial (see footnote 98).

²²² Keating 1992.

former by making this devolution possible as a gesture towards an underprivileged minority group; the latter by putting into profile the especially awkward fit of the Natives within multicultural postcolonial society, who might suddenly be seen as entitled to ‘too much’.

Therefore, the reappraisal of the Aborigine has often caused an ambiguous interplay of feelings of guilt and resentment amongst White Australians in which the recognition of the need for redress for past wrongs towards the Natives clashed with fear regarding the loss of mainstream privilege and property. Guilt and resentment has coloured the multiculturalist policies and mainstream efforts to reach a *modus vivendi* with the Indigenous population throughout much of the 1990s and 2000s in disturbing ways, and have uneasily co-existed in a double-faced ‘postcolonial racism’ ever since.²²³ Postcolonial racism manifests itself in White settlers who see Aborigines as enjoying too much care, too many privileges, and who, consequently, bend the multiculturalist argument to their own needs.

In the early 1990s, an uncanny White ‘underdog’—mainly the impoverished lower-middle class located in White rural areas and 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 1996.²²⁴ In her notorious maiden speech to the House of Representatives of the Australian Federal Parliament on 10 September 1996, Hanson proclaimed that:

I won the seat of Oxley largely on an issue that has resulted in me being called a racist. That issue related to my comment that Aboriginals received more benefits than non-Aboriginals. 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

²²³ Gelder & Jacobs 1998: 17.

²²⁴ Gelder & Jacobs 1998: xii.

assumption that Aboriginals are the most disadvantaged people in Australia.²²⁵

Thus, Ien Ang argues that:

[t]he eruption of Pauline Hanson and her One Nation Party 1996 was a sharp reminder that the structures of feeling of White Australia have not disappeared in a time of Aboriginal reconciliation and multiculturalism ... And while by 2001 Pauline Hanson's role on the Australian political stage seems well and truly finished, her quick and spectacular rise and fall should remind us that what she stands for—the anxieties and prejudices of White Australia—has not fully disappeared from the Australian cultural landscape. On the contrary, the longevity of the government of John Howard ... testifies to the fact that the ideology of Hansonism cannot be easily dismissed as just a fringe phenomenon in contemporary Australia.²²⁶

Ien Ang sees Hansonism living on in the larger block of conservative political parties, which was 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, is formally opposed to Hanson's "unsophisticated racist indiscretions." However, he has made Hanson's "crude white populism respectable by translating it into mainstream common sense—a mainstream unwilling to seriously address reconciliation with Indigenous Australia and deeply suspicious of immigration and multiculturalism, especially when it is seen as a threat to 'the Australian way of life.'"²²⁷

Notably, the ambiguities of postcolonial racism have surfaced in the frictional calls for *Reconciliation* and *Apology* over the last decade—an apology that was finally offered to the nation in February 2008 by Labor party's Prime Minister Kevin Rudd at his taking position in Parliament. The terms Reconciliation and Apology have embodied the clash between what Aborigines and progressive non-Native Australians feel as the need for an officially endorsed 'Sorry', and what conservative mainstreamers perceive as an

²²⁵ Tingle 1996; Hanson 2007: 1 (my emphasis).

²²⁶ Ang 2003: 51-2.

²²⁷ Ang 52.

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 Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal contact with the official acknowledgement of “a colonial legacy of invasion, dispossession and injustice” with the aim to effect “closure to this colonial narrative by recognising Aboriginal claims upon the historical past from which the settler nation constructed its ‘nation’.”²²⁸ This policy, which should be understood then “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,”²²⁹ was officially embraced by the progressive Keating government in 1992. Nevertheless, the ambiguous positioning of mainstream society in this process causes many Aborigines to hold that “[t]here can never be any reconciliation between Black and White Australians until our sorry past is redressed.”²³⁰ Philip Batty therefore points at 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.²³¹

In response to this, Therese Caiter argues that “this ‘new’ construction of Aboriginal culture is a lot less new than it might seem.”²³² 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, “[t]he central problem is the failure of non-Aboriginals to comprehend us Aboriginal people, or

²²⁸ Frost 1997.

²²⁹ Gelder & Jacobs 1998: 30.

²³⁰ Langford Ginibi 2001: 219.

²³¹ Batty 1998 (my emphasis). 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” (Keating 1992). Indeed, Keating’s words turn Reconciliation into a redemptive site where ‘authentic’ Australianness may be retrieved.

²³² Caiter 1998-9.

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.”²³³ 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.*²³⁴

The sophisticated eloquence of the PM echoes the plainer words of Pauline Hanson’s Maiden speech three years earlier, in which she holds that:

I am fed up with being told, ‘This is our land.’ Well, where the hell do I go? I was born here and so were my parents and children. I will work beside anyone and they will be my equal but I draw the line when told I must pay and continue paying for something that happened over 200 years ago. Like most Australians, I worked for my land; no-one gave it to me.²³⁵

Not surprisingly, as a political movement, Reconciliation faced an uncertain future after a decade of Conservative government. Right-wing rule has curtailed Australia’s official commitment to multiculturalist issues in the broadest sense; not only did this come to the fore in its meddling with Native title in 1998 and the Northern Territory intervention in 2007,²³⁶ but also in its restrictive immigration policy after the attack on

²³³ Langton 1993: 38-9.

²³⁴ Quoted in Cunneen & Libesman 2000: 153, my emphasis.

²³⁵ Tingle 1996; Hanson 2007: 2.

²³⁶ 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 Jon

the Twin Tower in 2001, leading to the Tampa crisis. Although an official Apology was finally produced in 2008, this gesture has not been accompanied by a serious programme of aid and funding to tackle the ingrained causes of the underprivileged state of many Indigenous people.²³⁷ Evidently, an apology for past events is only the first step on a long road towards the effective redress of a past of invasion and genocide. Apology should not only take place in the area of the symbolic, but also translate in material improvements.

What Cunneen and Libesman call John Howard's "twisted logic of genocide denial," which uncannily presents past atrocities as well-meant policies, points to a great psychological need to wash White hands of the terrors instigated by European civilisation over two centuries of White occupation. The list of self-serving, racist crimes is long. The straightforward extermination of Aboriginal nations, starting with British settlement, "occurred in every Australian State until 1928." Forced segregation of Natives 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 "breeding-out" policy now known as *The Stolen Generations*—the forced, institutionalised removal of "half-cast" children from their Aboriginal families living on reserves to special homes and/or White foster-families—was carried out from the 1930s until the 1970s.²³⁸ While it is obvious that the traumatic impact of these events on the Native population must have been devastating, the full recognition of their suffering is still a matter of contention.

Aboriginal genocide was justified by White culture's hostile vision of Australian nature, under which the Aborigines were subsumed and thus to be dominated and subjugated at all cost. Sneja Gunew observes in a discussion of the Australian literary canon that:

... 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 Aboriginal

Altman & Melinda Hinkson (eds). *Coercive Reconciliation. Stabilise, Normalise, Exit Aboriginal Australia*. North Carlton: Arena, 2007.

²³⁷ *NY Times*, 13 Feb 2008.

²³⁸ Collingwood-Whittick 2000: 117, 120-3. For a very detailed study of Aboriginal genocide and forced child removal see Anna Haebich's *Broken Circles: Fragmenting Indigenous Families 1800-2000* (2001).

inhabitants who were not so much colonized as systematically exterminated along with other obstacles in the path of white colonization).²³⁹

Gunew's argument implies that mainstream unwillingness to come to terms with the past is not only connected with the uncanny repression of a dark history of violence against the Natives, but also with the undigested episode of the violent and cruel Imperial rejection of White convicts by the Motherland. The latter is supported by an uncanny reversal distinguishable 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.²⁴⁰ In such a view, Aboriginal extermination, segregation and breeding-out all form part of an uninterrupted link 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.

Thus, the Aboriginal re-mapping of Australia has had deeply-felt consequences for the issues of nation and identity-building. Consequently, Gelder and Jacobs locate Indigenous land claims "as crucial in the recasting of Australia's sense of itself." By "turn[ing] what seems like 'home' into something else, something less familiar and less settled,"²⁴¹ these territorial claims draw attention to what the modern Australian nation has repressed for so long about its past. Aboriginal presence, dispossession and genocide resurface with the force of law, shake the foundations of White-settler society, unsettle the very identity derived from it, and estrange White Australians from their perceived 'home'. This manifestation of the uncanny was described as "hysteria and hostility" amongst White Australians by the left-wing Prime Minister Keating in his famous *Redfern* defence of Aborigine-inclusive multiculturalism,²⁴² and aptly defined by Gelder and Jacobs as "white moral panic". The latter results from a typically *postcolonising* context, because 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."²⁴³

²³⁹ Gunew 1990: 103.

²⁴⁰ Collingwood-Whittick 2000: 123.

²⁴¹ Gelder and Jacobs 1998: xi, xiv.

²⁴² Keating 1992.

²⁴³ Gelder & Jacobs 1998: 3, 13.

Multiculturalism, then, is a *political* project that aims to establish the necessary conditions for the respectful co-existence and egalitarian, democratic interaction of cultural diversity within a postcolonial nation space. However, the Australian particulars give rise to anxiety and uncanny conflict whenever Native and non-Native culture enter into contact. These cultures are seemingly incommensurable in their worlds of experience and demands, yet bound to ‘getting on’ in a shared site which is at once homely and unhomely, strongly mapping Homi Bhabha’s ‘strange cultural survival’ across articulations of race.

2.3.3. Ethnicity

As pointed out above, the treatment of more recent waves of immigration to Australia bears structural links with historical state policies towards Aborigines, and therefore deserves some attention. Sneja Gunew’s portrayal of the subversive undercurrents in Australian multiculturalism opens up the migrant experience to a similar set of uncanny frictions when confronting Anglo-Celtic settler culture. Through opposing visions of Australia as heaven or, alternatively, hell, she argues that:

By definition Australia existed as a refuge and a promise to those waves of European emigrants who were fleeing the known world during and after the Second World War. How different already, figuratively speaking, was this metonymy compared to those projected by self-styled legitimate residents who located their national origins in institutions which are incarnations of legitimacy: namely the prison, the penal colony, the biblical fallen ... [T]o 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.²⁴⁴

In discussing the inclusion of non-British non-Native writing into the literary canon, Gunew observes that “no language can be considered transparent or referential in the fullest sense ... 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

²⁴⁴ Gunew 1990: 111.

expression of experience.” Gunew links this to the possible definition of multiculturalism as an ethnic “counter-public sphere” in which dissident voices may be heard.²⁴⁵ This line of thought brings us back to Homi Bhabha’s ideas on the possibilities for a strange cultural survival in the liminality of the nation space; one could equally claim that, if dissidence may be validated rather than assimilated and neutralised through multiculturalism, this calls into being another terrain for the uncanny to estrange the familiar. Such unsettlement is furthered by the fact that 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 fully opens up the issue of immigration towards White uncanny 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.”²⁴⁶ On the one hand, this definition of Australianness from *without* (Orientalist in nature) fed back into the coexistent one from *within* against the Aborigines (Aboriginalist in nature) by promoting the conceptual isolation of the Native Australians from related racial 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 that:

Immigration and multiculturalism are issues that this government is trying to address but for far too long, ordinary Australians have been kept out of any debate by the major parties. 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

²⁴⁵ Gunew 1990: 114.

²⁴⁶ Ang 2003: 55-6.

all migrants into this country were of Asian origin. They have their own culture and religion, form ghettos and do not assimilate.²⁴⁷

Thus, Ien Ang writes that “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.”²⁴⁸ Here one can observe another interesting double bind in attitudes towards the Aborigines and non-European immigrants. The notion of ‘too much’ in the previous lines harks back to the uncanny White postcolonial racism towards the Indigenous peoples in Australian multiculturalist society discussed above; it is rooted in a similar fear of loss of national identity which is always understood as White European and preferably Anglo-Celtic. Both expressions of postcolonial racism circulate through each other in an uncanny fear of the non-European Other; it 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.”²⁴⁹ In this vision, the European settler would ultimately conflate with the Indigene in an uncanny minority position, a possibility that would have to be exorcised at all costs. This fear, real enough as it is, is far from realistic. The *Age*’s journalist Laura Tingle contrasted the claims made in Pauline Hanson’s Maiden Speech with statistic material and found the Asian ‘threat’ lacking 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.²⁵⁰

2.3.4. Gender

The Aboriginal scholar Marcia Langton wrote that “[t]he intersection of ‘race’ and gender continues to require deconstruction to allow us to decolonise our

²⁴⁷ Tingle 1996; Hanson 2007: 3.

²⁴⁸ Ang 2003: 68.

²⁴⁹ Ang 2003: 60.

²⁵⁰ Tingle 1996.

consciousness.”²⁵¹ Sneja Gunew opens up Australian multiculturalist and territorial issues to gender by maintaining that culture—as well as land, one might add—“must be governed by customary laws of ownership and inheritance. Multiculturalism, the very term, suggests paternal confusion and maternal promiscuity.” This gendered metaphor points the use of Australian multiculturalism as a new, hidden form of assimilation in which cultural diversity is controlled and curtailed to male WASP benefit. However, it also highlights the 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.”²⁵² The promiscuous quality of this maternal wealth of minority manifestations sprouting from Australian soil is able to interrogate and confuse monolithic patriarchal Anglo-Celtic visions of Australian identity by disclosing and foregrounding cultural difference. Hence, the paternal is defined as hierarchical and therefore static and sterile, whereas the maternal as democratic and thus dynamic and productive. Australian multiculturalism and its cultural manifestations can thus be converted in a counter-public sphere that links up with feminist analysis 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”²⁵³ and Gayatri Spivak’s conclusion that “[t]here is no virtue in global laundry lists with ‘woman’ as a pious item.”²⁵⁴

This takes us to the idiosyncratic effects of Aboriginal femininity on the Australian multicultural scene. Gelder and Jacobs state that in Australia “ethnicity is a category which is mobilised through the agendas of multiculturalism,” and put to use as the “primary social category” before class and gender.²⁵⁵ Nevertheless, they also dedicate considerable space to the issue of “women’s business” in Aboriginal culture in a chapter entitled “Promiscuous Sacredness”. Promiscuity here has a similar connotation to Gunew’s use of the term: it refers to a discursive disposition, here enveloped in secrecy, spilling over into and interrogating another discursive terrain.²⁵⁶ Promiscuity of the sacred is the term used to show how secret Aboriginal “women’s business” can become activated in political and legal ambits: not only is there such a thing as Native land claims

²⁵¹ Langton 1993: 54.

²⁵² Gunew 1990: 100.

²⁵³ Gunew 2004: 3.

²⁵⁴ Spivak 1988: 308.

²⁵⁵ Gelder & Jacobs 1998: 98.

²⁵⁶ Gelder & Jacobs 1998: 128.

on sacred sites, but they may very well productively overlap with gender. In reference to a property claim on the sacred Welatye-Therre site near Alice Springs by the Arrernte women of Central Australia, the taboo female ceremonies connected to the site are defended by a spokeswoman who uncannily links and justifies female Aboriginal ritual and feminism as practices which both aim to restore spiritual and emotional health to women. She maintains that “[t]hey are a vital part of being a woman. Like you’ve got women’s liberation, for hundreds of years we’ve had ceremonies which control our conduct, how we behave and act and how we control our sexual lives. They give spiritual and emotional health to Aboriginal women.”²⁵⁷

Thus, the ambivalent presence of ‘promiscuity’ in the nation space, both praised and feared for its *healing* potential of change, may offer yet another slant on Freud’s study of the uncanny and reinforce its relationship with gender as highlighted in Hélène Cixous’ feminist analysis of the repression/resurgence of the incest wish. Freud’s ideas on the oedipal constitution of culture and society evolve towards the *primal horde* in the fourth essay of *Totem and Taboo*, “The Infantile Recurrence of Totemism”.²⁵⁸ He takes as his point of departure the androcentric Darwinist hypothesis that humans initially lived in bands constituted of a single dominant male who controlled a group females and his offspring, and:

... propos[es] that in one fateful era, *inaugurating human culture and society*, the excluded junior males rebelled against their father, driven by desire for his females, resentment of his tyranny, and new confidence perhaps arising from the possession of some new weapon. (I have elsewhere proposed that this new weapon could have been the capacity for culture itself.) They killed and ate the father, thus by identification gaining some of his authority. The totem meal re-enacts this “memorable and criminal deed, which was the beginning of so many things—of social organization, of moral restrictions and of religion”... Their goal achieved and their hostility spent, the brothers’ love for the slain father came to the fore, and in remorse, and through a fear of the war of all against all to which the succession would otherwise lead, they set up the first prohibitions in the name of the now defied patriarch: One must not kill the totem animal (father) and one must not commit what for the first

²⁵⁷ Gelder & Jacobs 1998: 122.

²⁵⁸ Freud 1998: 86-138.

time becomes the crime of ‘incest’ with those women whose desirability instigated the revolt in the first place, that is, the father’s consorts. 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.²⁵⁹

The primal horde myth has been widely rejected as a theoretical construct and historical impossibility, 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 kind of wish-fulfilment 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.”²⁶⁰ 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,”²⁶¹ under which the world of art and, thus, literature are subsumed. In defiance of male prerogative, promiscuity—in its widest sense—offers itself up as the uncanny 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, Bhabha’s “strange cultural survival” can be seen to operate in the racial, ethnic as well as *gendered* liminality of the nation space.

²⁵⁹ Paul 1996: 275 (my emphasis).

²⁶⁰ Paul 1996: 276.

²⁶¹ Paul 1996: 284. *The International Dictionary of Psychoanalysis* says that “[s]ublimation 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 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” (my emphasis; see Works Cited: “Sublimation”).

2.4. The Postcolonial Australian Uncanny and Political Agency

It is now time to draw together the different strands of postcolonial identity formation which have been identified—race/ethnicity, gender, and to a lesser extent: class—and evaluate how they uncannily rearticulate or postcolonise subject positions, mediating between the physical body and the body politic of the nation. How does individual, communal and national identity formation lock into the flux of social change?

In a postmodern critique of ideology formation, the Marxist philosopher Slavoj Žižek takes issue with traditional psychoanalytical accounts of:

... misery and psychic suffering 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.²⁶²

Žižek provides the Freudian framework of repression with its social basis to identify the roots 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.”²⁶³ According to Žižek, the 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

²⁶² Žižek 1994: 6.

²⁶³ Žižek 1994: 7.

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 fiction [of ideology], that returns in the guise of *spectral apparitions*.²⁶⁴

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.”²⁶⁵ Thus, Žižek sees social antagonism as the uncanny ghost that a prevalent ideology’s imperfect representation of reality necessarily calls into being and that haunts hegemonic discourse’s very incompleteness. Here, my concern is with how the unrepresentable spectral apparition of ideological/discursive antagonism, which Žižek primarily understands as class struggle, can be extended to include race and gender antagonism, and may be used to re-inscribe the body in a corporal politics of liberation.

Within a framework of Gay and Lesbian Theory, Judith Butler’s 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.”²⁶⁶ 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 on the (neo)colonizer’s image.²⁶⁷ 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:

²⁶⁴ Žižek 1994: 25-6 (my emphasis). 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” (1980: 81-3).

²⁶⁵ Žižek 1994: 26 (my emphasis).

²⁶⁶ Butler 1990: 142.

²⁶⁷ Bhabha 1990b: 312 (my emphasis).

... 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].²⁶⁸

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 in Hegel, Marx, Lukacs 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 reproduces the very subject/object dichotomy it aims to overcome. Ultimately, the terms of "appropriation, instrumentality, and distanciation 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."²⁶⁹

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 its turn operates through the *repetition* of an event rather than its epistemological invention or founding. Butler assigns a subversive quality to agency because repetition implies "the possibility of variation." To her:

[t]he 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

²⁶⁸ Butler 1990: 142 (my emphasis).

²⁶⁹ Butler 1990: 144.

redeployment; it is not a transcendental subject who enables action in the midst of such a convergence.²⁷⁰

Her aim becomes, then, to locate subversive practices of gender signification as a politics to undo restrictive essentialist dichotomies: “[j]ust 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 such defamiliarizing, *uncanny* instances in parodical gender behaviour 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.²⁷¹ She reasons that taking identity as an effect allows agency to be employed against views that consider categories of gender “foundational and fixed.” Thus, she concludes that:

[f]or 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 constitute identity and, therefore, the immanent possibility of contesting them.²⁷²

Thus, Butler’s performative politics of gender articulation establishes structural connections with micronarratives of an anti-Imperial local kind, and as such links up

²⁷⁰ Butler 1990: 144-5.

²⁷¹ Butler 1990: 146 (my emphasis).

²⁷² Butler 1990: 147 (my emphasis).

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 looks into the uncanny effects of European civilisation on the colonial subject, "[f]or the epic intention of the civilizing mission ... 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. 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). This is to say that the effective construction of the discourse of mimicry as embodied in the colonial subject is grounded in an uncanny ambivalence that necessarily produces the terms of its own difference through the repetition of the mimic act.²⁷³ Bhabha links the appearance of this mimic difference to "mockery", compatible with Butler's subversive laughter, which threatens "the civilizing mission ... by the displacing gaze of its disciplinary double."

On the one hand, his analysis links up with Butler's words on the construction of gender: paradoxical repetition can defy the gendered and racial parameters of Western subjectivity, while the rupture of the Western discourse "transform[s] into an uncertainty which fixes the ... subject as a 'partial' presence." Bhabha explains that this partiality should be taken as both incomplete and virtual, and the latter quality, on the other hand, metamorphoses the mimic colonial subject into the uncanny double of Western subjectivity. This ghost is embodied through the repetition of the incomplete mimic act and insistently haunts the faultlines of colonial discourse through "resemblance" as well as an antagonistic "menace"²⁷⁴ converging with Žižek's discursive spectral apparition. The appearance of the ghost leads us into the terrain of uncanny non-representation, and not surprisingly, Bhabha holds that "[t]he 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."²⁷⁵

As such, partial representation through mimicry defamiliarizes the notion of identity from essentialist readings. In such a reading, the uncanny appears at the *political*

²⁷³ Bhabha 1994 : 86.

²⁷⁴ Bhabha 1994 : 86.

²⁷⁵ Bhabha 1994 :88 (Bhabha's emphasis).

interstice of “what is known and permissible and that which though known must be kept concealed,” because the problem of representing difference is not only ontological but also of authority.²⁷⁶ Thus, in defining the *strategic* objectives of the desires underlying colonial mimicry, Bhabha uses its defining feature of partial presence to coin the concept of the “metonymy of presence”:

In mimicry, the representation of identity and meaning is rearticulated along the axis of metonymy. As Lacan reminds us, mimicry is like camouflage, not a harmonization of repression of difference, but a form of resemblance that differs/defends presence by displaying it in part, metonymically. Its threat, I would add, comes from the prodigious and strategic production of conflictual, fantastic, discriminatory “*identity effects*” in the play of a power that is elusive because it hides no essence, no ‘itself.’ And that form of *resemblance* is the most terrifying thing to behold ...²⁷⁷

The terrifying image returned is one of non-representative emptiness, the death of the Western and Colonial Subject alike, but at the same time the mirror image defines its own terms of resistance and reconfiguration; as an uncanny ghost, it defends the possibility of its own corporality and “necessarily raises the question of the *authorization* of colonial representations.” In other words, “the fetishized colonial culture is potentially and strategically an insurgent counter-appeal”²⁷⁸ which embodies the seed for political agency on both the private and public level.

The anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli has the following to say on the Australian specifics of *postcolonial* mimicry, which she sees embedded in what one might call “the Indigenous trap of authentication”:

Frantz Fanon and the school of subaltern studies have helped us understand how colonial dominations worked by inspiring in colonized subjects a desire to identify with their colonizers. 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

²⁷⁶ Bhabha 1994: 89.

²⁷⁷ Bhabha 1994: 90 (Bhabha’s emphasis).

²⁷⁸ Bhabha 1994: 91 (Bhabha’s emphasis).

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. But this call does simply produce good theater; rather, it inspires impossible desires: *to be* this impossible object and to transport its ancient, prenatal meanings to the present in whatever language and moral framework prevails *at the time of enunciation*.²⁷⁹

In an earlier article, Povinelli had already pointed out that “the contradictory demands the law [i.e. Native title legislation] places on Indigenous subjects 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.”²⁸⁰ This description of the impossible recoverability of the Aboriginal sign—the Aboriginal as ghostly (non)presence—harks back to Cixous’ and Žižek’s uncanny politics of non-representation, while beckoning towards a reconfiguration of identity beyond its postcolonial ‘death’, that is, beyond its fixation in a nostalgic past, irrecoverable and apolitical. However, it also links Homi Bhabha’s argument on colonial mimicry to the postcolonial enunciation of uncanny cultural difference from the perspective of Aboriginality: whereas the colonial moment required an impossible assimilation of Aboriginality into mainstream culture—“unabsorbable difference”²⁸¹—the post/neo-colonial era demands its equally unachievable dissimulation, which in itself is an uncanny re-inscription of earlier essentialist strategies that aimed to ensure Australia’s modernity.

The objective, therefore, is not to search for and establish an immanent Aboriginal subjectivity that subjugates the very group it seeks to liberate from an oppressive racist discourse into the essentialist trap of identity politics.²⁸² Rather, it is the investigation into the *performance* of the Aboriginal sign in the political and cultural arena of Australia

²⁷⁹ Povinelli 1999: 633.

²⁸⁰ Povinelli 1998: 580. I take her use of ‘to ghost’ as a reference to the Aboriginal sign haunting the national self-definition and to the impossibility of its representation as a true essence.

²⁸¹ Gunew 2004: 100.

²⁸² Michel Foucault warns against re-inscriptions 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?” (1980: 86) For “genealogy” see footnote 264.

with a view to laying bare the political and legal mechanisms that determine the parameters of its very performability, and to reinstating a notion of *agency* that confers a liberating, postcolonising impulse. In its broadest sense, the meeting of Native and non-Native cultures within the postcolonial nation space must be considered a territory in which racial affiliations interrogate and re-articulate the ethnic as well as gender in productive overlaps with class: if we adapt Bernard Smith's figure of speech, these parameters of the Australian nation are effectively "haunted" by "the spectre of Truganini."²⁸³ This 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."²⁸⁴

2.5. The Uncanny Role of the Literary in Postcolonial Australianness

Of colonial cultural production, Homi Bhabha wrote:

In the ambivalent world of the 'not quite/not white,' on the margins of metropolitan desire, the *founding objects* of the Western world become the erratic eccentric, accidental *objets trouvés* of the colonial discourse—the part-objects of presence. It is then that the body and the book lose their representational authority. Black skin splits under the racist gaze, displaced into signs of bestiality, genitalia, grotesquerie, which reveal the phobic myth of the undifferentiated whole white body.²⁸⁵

If the colonial book long lost its representational authority, then in the articulation of postcolonial Australian identity, writing is strategically employed as social intervention by questioning its fixity. According to the Cultural-Materialist critic Alan Sinfield, "[l]iterary practices are not ideologically neutral (very little is): they are part of the

²⁸³ Attwood 1996: xxx. Bain Attwood quotes from 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. *The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture* describes her as an "icon of survival" for Aboriginal Tasmanians, whereas non-Natives 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" (Kleinert and Neale 2000: 722).

²⁸⁴ I play on Sneja Gunew's understanding of the terms of postcolonial nation building (2004: 29).

²⁸⁵ Bhabha 1994: 92.

apparatus through which people demarcate their identities within society.”²⁸⁶ Thus, in a lengthy discussion of the Australian literary canon Sneja Gunew posits that in Australia the public sphere of legitimate national culture—which, after all, defines national identity—has been constructed by a totalising discourse; the latter combines liberal humanist readings of cultural history with Leavisite literary criticism, and primes a British origin to Australian culture.²⁸⁷ Australian cultural history has fortunately been largely rewritten throughout the 1990s and 2000s in “a process stemming from the re-emergence of Aboriginal people in the written Australian historical landscape after a century and a half of almost exclusion.”²⁸⁸ Although the genocidal drama has been dismissed by such contemporary historians as Keith Windschuttle, who uncannily exchange the benign settlement paradigm for violent conquest, such denialism is heavily contested amongst progressive historians; this, in turn, has turned the academic field of history into another battlefield where the authorisation of Aboriginal voices and versions is the bone of contention.²⁸⁹

Modern historiography has been instrumental in the legal impetus towards Native title legislation so that “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.”²⁹⁰ However, its findings have also become one of the factors in refocusing literary criticism, turning it into a contested ground of competing cultural discourses. Amongst those authors who have taken issue with mainstream versions of history from an Aboriginal perspective in their writing, Mudrooroo has made a considerable contribution in his poetry, fiction and essays, although his importance and authority as a Native spokesperson have been severely affected by his identity plight since the mid 1990s. In 1997, Mudrooroo testified to the impact of the new historical, legal and political developments in *Milli Milli Wangka*, justifying the rewriting of his groundbreaking²⁹¹ study of Aboriginal literature as follows: “... how much things have

²⁸⁶ Sinfield 1983: 6.

²⁸⁷ Gunew 1990: 100-1.

²⁸⁸ In the new millennium, the conservative historian Keith Windschuttle started a frontal attack on the New Australian History with his volume *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, to which Robert Manne’s *Whitewash*, amongst others, responded. The latter volume contains a host of texts by Australian’s foremost progressive historians, such as Henry Reynolds, who contest Windschuttle’s recovery of the “benign settlement” paradigm.

²⁸⁹ Veracini 2003: 226.

²⁹⁰ Veracini 2003: 230.

²⁹¹ Paul Sharrad, for example, holds that “Whatever we may think of Colin Johnson or 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” (2008: p.15, endnote ii).

changed since *Writing from the Fringe*, the first edition of this work, appeared in 1990.”²⁹² However, the refocusing of the literary debate is broader than through the Native issue alone.

The start of Australian literary criticism is marked by White nationalist academic views which hold that postcolonial national culture can only differentiate itself by mediating the uniqueness of the landscape, thus, “‘the’ land itself will speak through and in an authentic Australian literature.”²⁹³ This, in turn, would allow a breakaway from the British colonial paradigm. However, up until the 1970s, this agenda of locating “cultural closures” in natural features produced the literary canon with mainly “classic realist texts,” firmly rooted in a male Anglo-Celtic culture that impeded not only race and ethnicity but also gender to speak through the land.²⁹⁴ As such, literature has played its own, questionable role in the construction of a whitewashed Australian identity. As we have seen before:

[m]ulticulturalism 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 1988.²⁹⁵

More specifically, the White male Anglo-Celtic bushranger has functioned as the measure of “true” and “real” Australianness in the literary canon, “as though truly Australian literature should be written by, for and about this character.”²⁹⁶ The abundant evidence Sneja Gunew presents for this case makes a telling reference to the pioneer literary magazine *The Bulletin*, whose celebration of the *bush myth*²⁹⁷ “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.”²⁹⁸

²⁹² Mudrooroo 1997a: 1.

²⁹³ Gunew 1990: 99.

²⁹⁴ Gunew 1990: 103.

²⁹⁵ Gunew 1990: 112.

²⁹⁶ Hodge & Mishra 1991: xv.

²⁹⁷ An egalitarian and anti-authoritarian philosophy of mateship among resourceful independent white males living in the Australian bush (See Works Cited: “The Australian Bush”).

²⁹⁸ Gunew 1990: 107.

Gunew counters this construction of Australianness by asserting that the most ‘authentic’ mediation of the Australian land in literature is necessarily established through Aboriginal voices. She highlights as well that the land nowadays also speaks through the voices of non-British migrants who already form a large part of the total population.²⁹⁹ Additionally she points out that there has already been a reassessment of the literary canon—with all its implications for the construction of national identity—by the incorporation of Aboriginal and women writing, and that the inclusion of non-Anglo-Celtic writing should even further recast the issue of an Australianness which is seen as problematically White and male.³⁰⁰ Ultimately, she avows that multiculturalism can only be productive as a counter public sphere in the debate on culture and literature if 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.”³⁰¹ As the following may demonstrate, in such a project of promiscuous confusion, the postcolonial uncanny reveals itself instrumental.

Elleke Boehmer’s assessment of common features in postcolonial writing points out that Native writers adapt cultural-specific items to White literary conventions with the purpose of alienating and Othering mainstream readership. By “using techniques and vocabulary they might find unfamiliar,” they establish a distinctly Native realm of experience.³⁰² We may understand these uncanny postcolonising adaptations as instances of *literary* metonymies of presence that materialize what Homi Bhabha detected as an “insurgent counter-appeal.” Thus, “[w]hat emerges between mimesis and mimicry is a *writing*, a mode of representation, that marginalizes the monumentality of history, quite simply mocks its power to be a model, that power which supposedly makes it imitable.”³⁰³ Or, to take this to a plainer, local 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’.”³⁰⁴ Here, the un-dead Aboriginal spectre signals the demise of Western metanarrative, imperfectly reproduced in the Australian context, against the particulars of

²⁹⁹ Gunew 1990: 107.

³⁰⁰ Gunew 1990: 114.

³⁰¹ Gunew 1990: 116 (my emphasis).

³⁰² Boehmer 1995: 230.

³⁰³ Bhabha 1994: 87-8.

³⁰⁴ Attwood 1996: xix-xx.

the local micronarrative, haunting what the “eminent Australian anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner was to call, in ... 1968 ..., ‘the great Australian silence.’”³⁰⁵ Not surprisingly, postcolonial writing often makes use of the fantastic so as to “dramatize split perceptions of postcolonial cultures”—that is, Native and non-Native— “undermining ‘purist’ representations of the world which have endured from colonial times.” Ultimately, “by mingling the bizarre and the plausible so that they become indistinguishable, postcolonial writers ... demand the prerogative of ‘redreaming’ their own land.” In the case of Aboriginal texts, such *re-Dreaming* may even be to the point that strangeness and unfamiliarity become “untranslatable,” making the text inaccessible.³⁰⁶ Thus, Boehmer accurately describes the formal conditions in which the uncanny may obtain. Furthermore, her analysis takes the uncanny in postcolonial literature into the realm of the political, as the formal features of this kind of fiction may form part of a strategy to implement a distinctly postcolonising agenda.

There exists, then, a specific kind of uncanny postcolonial fiction in the variety of Indigenous literary expressions that maintains a joint defiance of monolithic Western perceptions and closures of reality, and takes issue with essentialist race, class and gender dichotomies. In South-American literature, the incorporation of elements from a non-Western universe, often under the misnomer ‘fantastic’, into everyday reality has coined the genre of Magic Realism. In an Orientalist vein it takes over a colonial style of writing and “mimics the colonial explorer’s reliance on fantasy and exaggeration to describe new worlds,” but also uses the illusory to propose imaginary yet conceivable worlds that “expose the extremities of the neo-colonial condition.”³⁰⁷ Not surprisingly, the term Magic Realism has also been applied to many instances of Indigenous Australian fiction mobilising so-called “dreamtime narrative.”³⁰⁸ Alternatively, Mudrooroo has suggested Maban Reality as an Australian-Aboriginal equivalent for magic realism,³⁰⁹ but his current status of ostracisation in Aboriginal Studies raises questions to its effective use. Elsewhere I have suggested that *Uncanny Realism* may feel more adequate to refer to the intended inaccessibility of the Native universe perceived by Western readers in such texts:

³⁰⁵ Attwood 1996: xiv. Stanner referred to the complete absence of the Native in contemporary Australian History as practised by mainstream scholars.

³⁰⁶ Boehmer 1995: 242-3.

³⁰⁷ Boehmer 1995: 242.

³⁰⁸ Devlin-Glass 2008: 1.

³⁰⁹ See chapter 1, p.37-8 and chapter 4, pp.169-72.

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 ... As our western minds unsuccessfully grapple with events, our readings become *discomforting* inasmuch known schemes of explanation fail, due to the existence of an entirely different, actively engaging native universe ... [T]he uncanny ... may account for the psychological discomfort mainstream readers suffer, positioning them on that uneasy border between fantasy and reality where its distinctions disappear. In order to express this disturbing encounter of the Aboriginal and mainstream universe, one could opt for *uncanny realism*.³¹⁰

The term Uncanny Realism allows for the incorporation of a postcolonial mode in which gloomy imagery, emotional suffering, irrational fear and uncanny Gothic projections play an important role in the sustenance of a novel's action. It proposes the uncanny existence of a postcolonial world of experience that goes beyond ordinary Western perceptions and therefore defamiliarises the mainstream reader. Indeed, Gothic elements do appear in Alexis Wright's *Plains of Promise*, Mudrooroo's *Vampire* trilogy and prequels, Sally Morgan's *My Place* and Kim Scott's *True Country* and *Benang*.

The term Uncanny Realism points towards a Freudian process of mainstream defamiliarisation in the postcolonial setting. Nevertheless, Indigenous characters in this kind of fiction are also dislocated, unsettled and alienated, searching for their place in the world. This lack of situatedness indicates the postcolonial as active process rather than state, so to what point is Australia truly postcolonial? The Aboriginal scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson holds that:

In Australia the colonials did not go home and 'postcolonial' remains based on whiteness. This must be theorised in a way which allows for incommensurable difference between the situatedness of the Indigenous

³¹⁰ Renes 2002: 78-9.

people in a colonising settler society such as Australia and those who have come here. 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.³¹¹

She concludes that “[t]he coloniser/colonised axis continues to be configured within this postcolonising society 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.”³¹² Indigenous Australian literature engages with the postcolonising process in particular ways, investigating the tension between received notions of Aboriginality and Australianness and the right of self-definition through the mobilisation of the Aboriginal secret/sacred. A qualifier that may do better justice to Morgan, Mudrooroo, Scott and Wright’s literary output, which performs new inscriptions of Indigeneity and Australianness, may therefore be *Postcolonising Dreaming Narrative*, because it acknowledges and activates the uncanny secret/sacred interface of Native and non-Native epistemologies as a performative site of identity formation.

The proposal of the umbrella term *Postcolonising Dreaming Narrative* aims, then, to take issue with the belief that literature can deliver a single, objective, true and faithful representation of reality and identity, as 19th century Realist fiction set out to do in support of a Euro-centred agenda. The Realist objective, which in itself was a reaction against Romantic idealism, harked back to the Rationalist philosophy of the 18th century, embodied in the Enlightenment faith in universal natural laws and the unfaltering progress of human society through the application of the powers of Reason. Realism was later incorporated into the realm of 20th literature as the objective, atemporal, essentialist vision of authorship now known as liberal-humanism. However, over the last three to four decades the liberal-humanist position has been unmasked as the product of a conservative White male middle-class political agenda, based:

³¹¹ Moreton-Robinson 2003: 30.

³¹² Moreton-Robinson 2003: 37.

... on the notion of superiority of the sophisticated European subject or individual who embodies, in an ideal form, the economic, colonial power of Western civilisation, secure in its knowledge of the world and its ability to produce a true representation of it in its own image. And this world is, or should be, when it is governed properly according to these moral, aesthetic and political ideas, ordered, harmonious, obedient: that is, exquisitely structured and hierarchized.³¹³

As such, liberal humanism has been systematically bound up with the reproduction of the racist, patriarchal and classicist power structures enthrone a male Western elite. At bottom, the colonialist project had a much darker side that served to subdue and dominate territories and peoples abroad by the imposition of a Universalist, Modern Imperial reality in the name of 'Faith', 'Progress' and 'Reason'. Thus, *Postcolonising Dreaming Narrative* is engaged in undoing a Euro-centred, monolithic, totalising world view from an Indigenous Australian perspective that uncannily mobilises the Aboriginal secret/sacred.

The colonial project's figurative death may create a vital space for other realities, visions, positions and identities, and such an agenda may be seen at work in many a contemporary Aboriginal author—this is even the case in the work of Mudrooroo, whose position within Indigeneity is uncomfortably liminal and contested. This converts Indigenous-Australian fiction into a subversive site where uncanny manifestations of race, class and gender are in constant dialogue so as to re-define identities against essentialist mainstream positions. The latter vision may serve as the touchstone for the ensuing discussion of some instances of postcolonising fiction which, within a political agenda of cultural difference, perform an uncanny, de-essentializing re-articulation of the Native corpus into the Australian multiculturalist land and text-scape. Thus, Stephen Muecke argues that "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."³¹⁴ And as the Aboriginal scholar Michael Dodson argues in a discussion of 'Aboriginalities':

³¹³ Wilson 1995: 8.

³¹⁴ Muecke 1988: 418.

... [i]n making our self-representations public, we are aware that our different voices may be heard once again only in the language of the alien tongue. We are aware that we risk their appropriation and abuse, and the danger that a selection of our representations will be to once again fix Aboriginality in absolute and inflexible terms ... as the authoritative archetype of Aboriginality, now the “‘real Aboriginality’ because it came from an Aboriginal person. However, *without our own voices, Aboriginality will continue to be a creation for and about us. This is all the more reason to insist that we have control over both the form and content of representations of our Aboriginalities.* All the more reason that the voices speak our languages[,] refuse the reduction of Aboriginality to an object [and] resist translation into the languages and categories of the dominant culture. In fact, the insistence on speaking back and retaining control are highly political acts. They are assertions of our right to be different and to *practise* our difference. They refuse the reduction of Aboriginality to an object, they resist translation into the languages and categories of the dominant culture. *They are at times ancient, at times subversive, at times oppositional, at times secret, at times essentialist, at times shifting. It is for this very reason that I cannot stand here, even as an Aboriginal person, and say what Aboriginality is.* To do so would be a violation of the right to self-determination and the right of peoples to establish their own identity. It would also be to fall into the trap of allowing Aboriginality to be another *fixed* category.³¹⁵

³¹⁵ Dodson 2003: 39 (my emphasis).

Chapter 3

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"

(Morgan quoted in Bird & Haskell 1992: 20-1)

3.1. Mainstream Comfort

Sally Morgan's *My Place* (1987) forms part of a larger tradition of auto/biographies in Australian literature describing the lives of 'ordinary Australians,' which in the case of Aboriginal 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 such as Albert Facey's *A Fortunate Life* (1981), Patrick White's *Flaws in the Grass* (1981), Morris Lurie's *Whole Life* (1987), Glenyse Ward's *Wandering Girl* (1987), Ruby Langford's *Don't Take Your Love to Town* (1988) and Dorothy Hewett's *Wild Card* (1990). For a variety of reasons, *My Place* went down as a "landmark text"³¹⁶ in Australian literature and has maintained that reputation until today, as national sales of over 500,000 copies within a decade of its publication, widespread distribution in English and non-English speaking countries³¹⁷ and ongoing critical interest may show.³¹⁸ Whereas mainstream reception was unequivocally positive and sealed its commercial success, *My Place* would soon be showing its uncanny location in the Australian literary panorama.³¹⁹ Precisely because of its smooth acceptance by non-Native Australians, a series of critical questions would be raised as to the text's articulation of Aboriginality and the relationship it proposed to 'White Australia'. These disturbing questions on racial identity would strategically link up with issues of class and gender, since Sally Morgan described the circumstances of her own life on the poor urban

³¹⁶ Newman 1992: 66.

³¹⁷ Laurie 1999.

³¹⁸ See for instance Collingwood Whittick 2002, Huggins 2003 and Grossman 2006.

³¹⁹ Interestingly, the only comprehensive study edited on *My Place* bears the rather uncanny title *Whose Place?* (eds. Delys Bird & Dennis Haskell 1992).

fringe of Perth (its suburb Manning)³²⁰ and was seen to benefit professionally and socially from the success of her book.³²¹ The following will analyse how Sally Morgan rewrote race, gender, class and genre in order to dis-cover her Aboriginal descent; it will do so with a particular interest in how Morgan's text creates possibilities for uncanny notions of identity to appear within a literary framework of negotiation between autobiographical realism and Aboriginal *orature*.³²² Ultimately, Morgan's quest for identity activates the Aboriginal secret/sacred and inscribes the text beyond the Gothic and Magic Realism into *Postcolonising Dreaming Narrative*.

My Place's publication (1987) coincided with the preparations of the 1988 Bicentennial celebrations of the White 'discovery' and settlement of Australia, and Sally Morgan's autobiography, dealing with her search for her family's Aboriginal past, became thus embedded in a wider discussion of Australianness. The Aboriginal "problem" that filled the void of the "great Australian silence"³²³ had been slowly encroaching upon the national conscience after the 1960s and 70s Indigenous protest movements; these had resulted in more favourable legislation regarding Native citizenship, political representation, discrimination and Native title.³²⁴ In 1987, the issue of a "collective bad conscience" and "white guilt" regarding the treatment dispensed towards Australia's native population³²⁵ over the 200-year period of White dominion of the island-continent was becoming more acute, precisely because the nation was preparing for the celebration of a Whitewashed, Anglo-Celtic history of settlement. Not surprisingly "the Australian Bicentenary celebrations ... [were] counter-observed publicly by a great many Indigenous Australians as Invasion Day."³²⁶

On the political front this new political awareness would take shape in the work of the *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* (1987-91), which materialized

³²⁰ Morgan defines herself as "poor working class" in her youth (Bird & Haskell 1992: 7).

³²¹ Huggins 2003: 64.

³²² The term *Orature* was coined by the Ugandan scholar Pio Zimiru to avoid the oxymoron embedded in the concept of 'oral literature', and aims to equal the status of the oral tradition in non-literate societies to the written in literate ones. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines the oral tradition as "the passing on from one generation (and/or locality) to another of songs, chants, proverbs, and other verbal compositions within and between non-literate cultures; or the accumulated stock of works thus transmitted by word of mouth. Ballads, folktales, and other works emerging from an oral tradition will often be found in several different versions, because each performance is a fresh improvisation based around a 'core' of narrative incidents and formulaic phrases. The state of dependence on the spoken word in oral cultures is known as *orality*." (See works cited: "oral tradition").

³²³ Attwood 1996: xiv. In 1968, the renowned anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner coined this phrase to refer to the settler-centred version of Australian History put forward by contemporary mainstream scholars.

³²⁴ The National Referendum on Aboriginal Citizenship (1967), the establishment of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy (1972), the *Racial Discrimination Act* (1975), the *Aboriginal Land Rights Act* (1976).

³²⁵ Ommundsen 1993: 252.

³²⁶ Grossman 2003: 2.

in an influential report giving account of the unusually large proportion of Indigenous-Australians dying in custody after arrest or conviction. Its findings, while not conclusive on police involvement in deaths, showed nonetheless structural links to the vicissitudes of children of mixed Aboriginal descent. The victims of the forced child-removal policies imposed on Aboriginal families in the period up to 1970, these part-Aborigines were disproportionately represented in the prison population.³²⁷ This led to an uncanny exercise of prying into the country's silenced past with the ensuing official investigation into the *Stolen Generations*.³²⁸ This fleshed out in the *Bringing Them Home* report of 1997 and concluded that "between one in three and one in ten Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families and communities ... In that time not one Indigenous family has escaped the effects of forcible removal."³²⁹

As *My Place* depicts, Sally Morgan's family was no exception to this assimilation policy. Her 'quarter-cast' mother Gladys³³⁰ had conveniently married a failure of a White husband and was trying to live a White li(f)e in the suburban Perth of the 1950s, 60s and 70s. This she carried out in connivance with Sally's 'half-cast' grandmother, with whom she had managed to reunite after a separation imposed by the racial segregation and assimilation laws. *My Place* is the story of Sally's discovery of this "deceit."³³¹ As Gladys's testimony evidences, their experience with earlier racial legislation³³² had locked them into an uncanny circle of shame, fear and silence about their Aboriginal roots in order to prevent the family unit from being ruptured again:

I feel embarrassed now, to think that, once, I wanted to be white. As a child, I even hoped a white family would adopt me, a rich one, of course. I've changed since those days. I'm still a coward, when a stranger asks me what nationality I am, I sometimes say a Heinz variety. I feel bad when I do that: it's because there are still times when I'm scared inside, scared to say who I really am.³³³

³²⁷ Whimp 1996.

³²⁸ The term was given wide currency by the work of the historian Peter Read.

³²⁹ Quoted in Haebich 2000: 15.

³³⁰ Her mother's 'quarter-caste' status was the genetic result of one of Sally's great-grandmothers being a 'full-blood' Aborigine.

³³¹ Langton 1993: 29.

³³² 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

³³³ Morgan 1988: 305. Further references to *My Place* by page numbers only in this chapter.

My Place is, thus, an example of an engaged type of literature that would turn into an uncanny forerunner of the disclosure of discomfiting facts about Australia's past. While the assimilationist period 1930-1960 had strongly repressed Aboriginal literary expression:³³⁴

[t]he proliferation of Aboriginal *women's* autobiographies is part of a complex process of cultural transformation in contemporary Australian culture. These narratives have had a marked effect on reversing white cultural amnesia and have demonstrated Benedict Anderson's dictum that a country's biography, "because it can not be 'remembered,' must be narrated."³³⁵

My Place, as an uncanny instance of the disclosure of hitherto repressed native presence, managed to profit for its very moment of publication from the raised White awareness regarding Australia's silenced, forgotten Aboriginal past. As Edward Hills argues regarding Morgan's auto/biography:

[b]ecause the genre tends to foreground the relationship between subjectivity and acculturation, the focus of the narrative can involve critiques of the dominant social forces that have shaped the life of the narrated subject ... Sally Morgan's ... personal story provides powerful opportunities for rewriting history, and reconstructing cultural identities.³³⁶

In its own particular way, Morgan's text uncannily "touched at a raw nerve of the national consciousness" at the appropriate moment and in an appropriate shape.³³⁷

The disquieting truths contained in Sally Morgan's writing could have condemned *My Place* to rejection and oblivion, but it managed to reach out to a large mainstream readership by projecting a message that "white Australia could feel relatively comfortable about." This is so because "it is a book which offers some hope for peaceful racial cohabitation in the future. Its anger is directed primarily at past injustices, whereas present conflicts, such as the land rights issue, or the legal battle over black deaths in

³³⁴ Broun 1992: 23.

³³⁵ Brewster 1993; she quotes from Anderson 1991: 204 (my emphasis).

³³⁶ Hills 1997: 99.

³³⁷ Ommundsen 1993: 251.

custody, are passed over in silence.”³³⁸ The latter is not surprising: Morgan’s recovery of Aboriginality is foremost locked in the past because *she* had not suffered the moment of family rupture and displacement directly, despite having to live with its Whitewashed consequences. She had been instructed by her mother to tell her classmates she was “Indian,”³³⁹ which “the kids could accept ... they just didn’t want me pretending I was Australian when I wasn’t!”³⁴⁰ Mary Wright’s comment that Sally had to tell a “white lie” drives at the heart of the problem: in claiming to be from India, she is uncannily turned into a foreigner, the upshot being that Aborigines cannot be at home in their own country. Thus, the uncanny void and displacement she felt as a suburban lower-class ‘immigrant’ girl had to be filled and repaired with a search for a lost identity which necessarily focused on her mother and grandmother’s past: “How could I tell her it was me, and her and Nan ... The feeling that a vital part of me was missing and that I’d never belong anywhere.”³⁴¹

This process of recovery was, to Sally, more a question of dis-covering the unknown than coming to terms with the known—the latter would correspond to Nan’s inscription into the family’s silenced history:

Sometimes people would say, “But you’re lucky, you’d never know you were [Aboriginal], you could pass for anything” ... I began to wonder what it was like for Aboriginal people with real dark skin and broad features, how did Australians react to them? How had white Australians reacted to my grandmother in the past, was that the cause of [Nan’s] bitterness?³⁴²

The ‘received,’ indirect 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.”³⁴³ This optimism for cultural belonging would allow White readers of *My Place* to accept (a diluted) responsibility for the Aboriginal plight because it enabled them “to envisage a time when such guilt had ceased to dominate their national

³³⁸ Ommundsen 1993: 255.

³³⁹ 38.

³⁴⁰ Wright 1988: 97.

³⁴¹ 106.

³⁴² 139.

³⁴³ 234.

consciousness.”³⁴⁴ In such a reading, the Aboriginal ghost that riddled the nation’s past would turn out to be appeasing rather than menacing. 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.” The other (minor) exception to the latter is Glenyse Ward’s *Wandering Girl*, which was published in the same socio-historical context of 1987 and also projected a “non-threatening” image of Aboriginality.³⁴⁵ While *My Place* was hailed by mainstream readership and set the tone for the kind of Aboriginal life-writing it was willing to accept, in Indigenous communities its reception was affected by what was perceived as a controversial inscription of Aboriginality.³⁴⁶ The matter of representability was less clear-cut than seemed.

3.2. Critical Discomfort

Initial feminist response to *My Place*’s gender inscription can be seen to obscure the racial problematic the text projected, which lies precisely in “what kinds of [Indigenous-Australian] stories White Australia would accept as ‘authentic.’”³⁴⁷ The budding genre of Aboriginal life-writing was heartily embraced by native women writers who started breaking the silence on their life histories with at least five autobiographies published between 1978 and 1987.³⁴⁸ As *My Place* is a female instance of life-writing, Morgan’s text was cushioned by feminist mainstream support, “which has in recent years endorsed and revalued feminine subjectivity” in response to mainstream politics of op/repression.³⁴⁹ This would obviously be further eased by the prevalent 1980s notion that “White womanhood [was] the universal and the norm from which to judge and include the experiences of Indigenous women,”³⁵⁰ so that any woman’s experience could be universalized and subsumed under the common marker of patriarchal oppression. *My Place* was obviously assimilable into such an agenda as the story of Sally’s retrieval of her own and direct family’s Aboriginal past is carried out along *matrilineal* lines.

The latter should come as no surprise. The frontier custom of White male settlers to relieve themselves with ‘black velvet’—the expression used to indicate sexual

³⁴⁴ Ommundsen 1993: 255.

³⁴⁵ Kurtzer 2003: 184-7. Note however that the Drake-Brockman family has always disputed Sally Morgan’s claims regarding her mother and grandmother’s insertion in their sexual economy.

³⁴⁶ See for instance Huggins 2003 and Kurtzer 2003: 187.

³⁴⁷ Kurtzer 2003: 183.

³⁴⁸ Elder 1992: 16.

³⁴⁹ Muecke 1988: 409.

³⁵⁰ Moreton-Robinson 2003: 69.

availability of Aboriginal women to White males in earlier settler days³⁵¹—and the politics of separation, assimilation and shame meant that the White paternal line was generally silenced and lost.³⁵² Any genealogical search, therefore, is foremost anchored in tracing the female native forbears. This would even be more so the case if, in Sally’s family the White great-grandfather presumably committed incest and felt the need to hide his traces all the more, which led to Sally’s mother, Gladys, being separated from her mother, Nan/Daisy. Thus, contemporary feminist readership would not only respond to this *Bildungsroman*’s successful quest for female subject formation—Sally does manage to establish her family ties and grow into a stronger, successful woman in the process—but also to the uncovering of the unspeakable racial-patriarchal violence perpetrated against the older women depicted in the text.

Nevertheless, after the first wave of positive reviews of the novel, both Native and non-Native criticism would soon produce more disquieting readings of the articulation of Morgan’s Aboriginal identity and the way it affected (White) reader positioning:³⁵³ *My Place* started to reveal its uncanny location in the Australian ‘textscape’. Judith Brett’s opinion of the book in the *Australian Book Review* was symptomatic for the kind of comforting empathy it had managed to raise in White readership:

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 Aboriginal story-telling traditions positions the reader as a receiver of gifts more explicitly than most.³⁵⁴

Obviously, such a gift is all the more attractive when it displays “forgiveness” and “a remarkable lack of bitterness.” This leads Brett to the conclusion that White “denials of guilt [are] the problem” and that “many Aborigines have a far greater understanding than

³⁵¹ Collingwood-Whittick 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” (Morgan 1988: 328). The term is nowadays considered politically incorrect and avoided.

³⁵² The custom was quietly understood, silenced and/or ignored in the mainstream; for instance, the rather uninhibited treatment of ‘black velvet’ in Xavier Herbert’s novel *Capricornia* caused a scandal after its publication in 1938.

³⁵³ See e.g. Muecke 1988, Newman 1992, Hills 1997, Huggins 2003, Grossman 2006.

³⁵⁴ Brett 1987: 10 (my emphasis).

most white Australians of what is needed to free this society from the guilt of the past.”³⁵⁵ Indeed, Brett’s reading raises questions as to what extent her agenda is disinterested; her use of the following quote from *My Place* in support of her assessment is illustrative. On having established family connections in the Pilbara district, in the North of Western Australia, an older Aboriginal ‘full blood’ woman makes the following confession to Sally: “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.”³⁵⁶ This is, in fact, an uncanny reversal of the ritual of acceptance into the Indigenous community: Aboriginality reaches out to the I-persona, Sally, and by extension identifies with the White, suitably light-skinned reader, causing the verb to ‘own’ to take on an uncanny, ominous meaning. Such demands from the oppressed for compassion enable White readership to position itself favourably towards a non-threatening politics of Aboriginal assimilation into the mainstream. This led Mudrooroo to his controversial conclusion that:

Sally Morgan’s book is a milepost 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.³⁵⁷

The particulars of the national “guilt trip” Brett suggested were enough reason for the non-Native academic Stephen Muecke to be suspicious of the “ease of acceptance” with which White reviewers and critics read the book, and his cue was taken by many others.³⁵⁸ He drew attention to how the issue of Morgan’s Aboriginal ‘authenticity’ had not only been mediated for mainstreamers by the confessional truthfulness the autobiographic genre purportedly projects (“it is not fiction but fact”) but also by a wide variety of mainstream filters. These took the shape of ‘well-meaning whites’ (a friend who encourages publication, a publishing house with an understanding editor—Ray Coffey for Fremantle Arts Press—and reviewers like Judith Brett, Nene Gare and Nancy Keesing³⁵⁹), and of western moral/religious approaches (Christianity and New Age

³⁵⁵ Brett 1987: 10-11.

³⁵⁶ Brett 1987: 10 (quoted from Morgan 1988: 228-9).

³⁵⁷ Mudrooroo 1990: 149.

³⁵⁸ Muecke published his oft-cited essay “Aboriginal Literature and the Repressive Hypothesis” in 1988.

³⁵⁹ Muecke 1988: 415-6. See Nene Gare’s review of *My Place* in *Westerly* 3 (1987): 80-1, 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”

spirituality³⁶⁰), which would all facilitate non-Native assimilation of the text's historical and political implications.

Muecke takes a Foucauldian approach³⁶¹ by asserting that definitions of Aboriginality³⁶² are inscribed in fields of anthropological, medical, legal knowledge etc., outside of which it is difficult for Aborigines to establish their 'authenticity' as Natives. Muecke's radical poststructuralist solution is that "[r]ather than seeing the text as a place where the desire to speak [the truth about Aboriginality] is liberated, it could be seen as a site of multiple constraints pertaining both to form and contextual relations."³⁶³ He adds that these limitations need not be negative, but that their identification may help to understand how meaning and identity are (re)negotiated beyond an essentialist Aboriginal subject position.

Nevertheless, the Aboriginal critic Marcia Langton notes that most White Australians construct images of Aboriginality through colonialist stereotypes rather than actual contact with the Natives.³⁶⁴ These stereotypes are evidently hard to break through for Natives and non-Natives alike, and any renegotiation of representation takes place in a discursive field in which stereotypes are strategically inserted and problematize communication. Thus, it remains doubtful whether Morgan's story, timely and useful as it may have been in addressing a large (inter)national audience on the Aboriginal issue,³⁶⁵ has achieved an articulation of Aboriginality that goes anywhere beyond an essentialist notion of blood lines.³⁶⁶ If the latter were the case, truth would become genetic truth rather than social practice, and Aboriginality inscribed in stifling immutability rather than a performative field of possible subject positions. In an oft-cited discussion of expressions of Aboriginality in the field of the arts, Marcia Langton writes that:

(quoted in Wright 1988: 94). Incidentally, Gare wrote the novel *The Fringe Dwellers* (1961) that inspired the homonymous film directed by Bruce Beresford (1986), which became famous for being one of the first in having an Aboriginal cast for the lead roles.

³⁶⁰ Muecke 1988: 412.

³⁶¹ He adapts Foucault's "repressive hypothesis," developed in the latter's *The History of Sexuality* (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 (Muecke 1988: 407).

³⁶² Marcia Langton quotes legal scholar John McCorquordale (1987), who found 67 definitions for Aborigines in the legal sphere, all relating to their status as ward of the state or inmate (1993: 28).

³⁶³ Muecke 1988: 417. Similarly, Edward Hills takes Ruby Langford's memoirs *Don't Take Your Love to Town* as an example to explain how publication for a large mainstream market is subject to "publishing, funding, historical, political ..., literary and linguistic conventions," which contains the danger of erasing subversive content so as not to offend mainstream sensibilities (Hills 1997: 100).

³⁶⁴ Langton 1993: 33-5.

³⁶⁵ Wenche Ommundsen writes that "*My Place* is primarily aimed at non-Aboriginal readers" (1993: 262).

³⁶⁶ Muecke 1988: 417, 411.

The Commonwealth definition [of Aboriginality] relies on High Court opinion. It is more social than racial: an Aboriginal person is defined as a person who is a descendant of an Indigenous inhabitant of Australia, identifies as Aboriginal, and is recognised as Aboriginal by members of the community in which he or she lives as Aboriginal. This definition is preferred by the vast majority of Aboriginal people over the racial definitions of the assimilation era ... However, as ... *My Place* demonstrated to the nation, the problem is not so straightforward. Morgan ‘found’ her ‘Aboriginality’ in adulthood, by suspecting a deceit. One wonders what the appeal was to such a large readership. Perhaps Morgan assuages the guilt of whites, 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? 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.’³⁶⁷

The crucial objection here is that Morgan moved from a non-Native into a Native identity in adulthood. While she explains on several occasions how she always felt “different”³⁶⁸ as a child—ringing of Homi Bhabha’s “the same, but not quite”³⁶⁹—the final revelation does not come until she is a teenager: “[f]or the first time in my fifteen years, I was conscious of Nan’s colouring.”³⁷⁰ Thus, the first third of the novel almost reads like any suburban kid’s life in Australia, and even impressed Aboriginal critic Jackie Huggins as “the life of a middle-class Anglo woman.”³⁷¹ While this structurally works to package the secret and surprise effect contained in the story,³⁷² it also tells us about Sally’s (tentative) insertion into the mainstream, and the effectiveness of the politics of assimilation both as external and internal pressure on identity formation; official policy and mainstream society favoured whiteness and silenced/obliterated its uncanny Native Other, so Nan and Gladys pretend to be at least non-Native—hence the

³⁶⁷ Langton 1993: 29-30.

³⁶⁸ 26, 86.

³⁶⁹ Bhabha 1994: 86.

³⁷⁰ Morgan 1988: 97.

³⁷¹ Huggins 2003: 62.

³⁷² Collingwood-Whittick 2002: 43.

white lie: “Tell them you’re Indian.”³⁷³ This means that the politics of fear, shame and silence operate on two, mutually re-enforcing levels: one is the resistance towards retrieving a collective history of oppression, hitherto unknown; and another, the difficulty of articulating an individual identity, hitherto repressed.

So what is the meaning of authenticity in such an ambiguous context of feeling and resistance in and towards the novel? What kind of Aboriginality does it end up revealing, and what does it hide? Not surprisingly, the Aboriginal scholar Sonja Kurtzer holds that *My Place* showed the limits of what mainstream Australian readership was willing to accept as authentic Aboriginality.³⁷⁴ Jackie Huggins asked, in 1993, why *My Place* had become “such an exclusively ‘holy’ text about Aboriginal life in Australia” and why it was celebrated as “the only experience told of Aboriginal life” up to date.³⁷⁵ Both are clearly doubtful that Sally Morgan’s hybrid Aboriginal experience should go down as ‘authentic’, but where does that leave the ‘not-so-black’ victims of the assimilation policy? Is their ambiguous insertion in mainstream society always and forever suspicious? Is assimilation into the mainstream a one-way street, and are there no protocols to reverse the path? How can Aboriginality be performed alternatively and acceptably so as not to lose the native heritage that White Australia policies aimed to ‘breed out’?

Sally herself is obviously riddled by these issues:

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?³⁷⁶

And their final resolution comes as a *deus ex machina*. The family’s journey to the Pilbara turns into a genealogical assimilation of Aboriginality, as they are to be accepted into the local Aboriginal kinship system with no apparent social demands on their notion of ‘belonging’:

³⁷³ 38.

³⁷⁴ Kurtzer 2003: 183 (originally published in 1998).

³⁷⁵ Huggins 2003: 62, 65 (originally published in 1993).

³⁷⁶ 141.

“[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 group and who you’re related to. You got a right to be here same as others ... You got your place now” ... 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.*³⁷⁷

Bearing in mind, then, the amount of controversy *My Place* has raised, the critical question becomes *how* Morgan has mediated her construction of Aboriginality, and whether her treatment of identity in *My Place* makes the familiar strange or, rather, the strange familiar to mainstream and Native readership. Is Aboriginality in or out of place at the end of the story, are Native and non-Native readers in or out of place when finishing the text, or are all, uncannily, both in *and* out of place?³⁷⁸ As *My Place* is an account of broken silences, the negotiation of their uncanny uncovering through a strategic employment of Native and non-Native genres in combination with rewritings of gender, race and class is a crucial issue in establishing answers.

3.3. Articulating the Unspeakable

One of the conceptual problems that make *My Place* such an uncanny text to confront is the fact that it is promiscuously embedded in a generic and cultural crossroads, in which one style may parade for another and contradictions are rife.³⁷⁹ This brings us back to the promiscuous field of minority expressions in Australian postcolonial society and

³⁷⁷ 231-3 (my emphasis).

³⁷⁸ For instance, Judith Brett is not bothered by “unease” in reading the book and readily accepts its as an exceptional “gift” to the (white) reader (1988: 10), while Jackie Huggins affirms that “what irks me about *My Place* is its proposition that Aboriginality can be understood by all non-Aboriginals ... [R]equiring little translation (to a white audience) ... it reeks of white-washing in the ultimate sense” and Sally Morgan has therefore “alienated Blacks like me who in an ideal World should be affirming her” (2003: 61, 65). In these two cases a non-Native reader is made ‘at home’ in the text and a Native reader is not, whereas a politically-engaged non-Native critic Stephen Muecke occupies an intermediate position.

³⁷⁹ Ommundsen 1993: 255.

literature understood as the productive confusion of male Anglo-Celtic control of cultural expression.³⁸⁰ In its mediation of racially and gender-imposed silences, *My Place* adapts a range of White literary genres, notably auto/biography, and Aboriginal orature or storytelling: it surreptitiously moves from a more conventional mainstream approach of narrative to what has been termed *Aboriginal life-writing*. The latter is, in fact, an important site where interests in more traditional forms of communication, often deemed 'authentic', productively merge with more experimental, 'inauthentic' approaches towards new native forms of expression that develop synchronically and diachronically in contact with mainstream culture. As Michele Grossman states in a recent overview:

... 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 ... [T]he 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 ... [I]ts expansion of and at times resistance to conventional strategies of textual organisation and conventional codes of textual valency has proved hospitable to authors, and sometimes editors, who wish to allow modalities of oral and written composition to co-exist within the text. Life-writing arises in part from the conjuncture of mainstream cultural and critical discontents with the strictures of traditional Western autobiographical forms, and in part from the insistence of 'minority' writers since the 1970s that the cultural specificities of their voices, knowledges, histories and modes of telling and representing remain both visible and active in texts concerned primarily with relating historical or auto/biographical narratives. Accordingly, for the producers of

³⁸⁰ Gunew 1990: 100. See also chapters 1 and 2.

life-writing texts in cultures that have both a long history of living oral traditions and also a history of involvement in and commitment to European cultures of literacy and print, the cultural status of life-writing as a genre more willing to engage with representational *métissage* across cultural and language traditions and communities than conventional literary Western paradigms has offered new opportunities for adapting the published text to the concerns and contributions of those whom such paradigms formerly excluded or marginalised, particularly at the levels of ‘speaking’ and ‘writing’.³⁸¹

Not surprisingly then, Wenche Ommundsen points out that *My Place* is an instance of life-writing (‘life story’) that borrows elements from the detective genre (there is a secret to be uncovered), the quest for romance (there is a long and difficult search for the Aboriginal self), the battler genre (Sally succeeds in the face of multiple adversities) and the foundling story (there is a lost identity).³⁸² As such, it offers a promiscuous blend of styles that initial reviews glossed over but were perceived as problematic as well as productive by later critics: “[a] second wave of commentary ... highlighted the difficulties created by the book’s complex generic and cultural derivation.” In Ommundsen’s point of view, *My Place* uncannily shuttles back and forth between different story-telling traditions:

Morgan draws more on white than on Aboriginal narrative genres in *My Place*, and ... 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.³⁸³

Nevertheless, the liminality of this lack of generic definition allows Kathryn Trees to invest *My Place* with the capacity to break personal and historical silence and to reveal uncomfortable truths. She also sees Morgan’s novel as:

³⁸¹ Grossman 2006.

³⁸² Ommundsen 1993: 253. The battler genre is “a common form in white writing” (Broun 1992: 24) and deals with individual (male) success in the face of adversities by stamina, and is, as such, associated with the bush myth.

³⁸³ Ommundsen 1993: 254-5.

... a generic mix, neither pure autobiography, history, nor novel. Morgan distorts European generic boundaries and blurs the distinction between literature and history. As a life story, *My Place* is able to lay claim to the truth and validity functions allowed to autobiography, which is privileged as the most accurate account of a person's life ... 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.³⁸⁴

Life-writing, then, offers the Aboriginal author a possibility to use the written text as a medium for Aboriginal knowledge or a native "counter-memory of ... violence and deculturation"³⁸⁵ to flourish in an uncanny movement that rewrites the mainstream "palimpsest"³⁸⁶ of Australian History.

Breaking the great Australian silence with the truth about Aboriginal oppression would certainly be *My Place*'s agenda as it is logically addressed to White readership. By her upbringing Sally was inserted into mainstream society and the "crucial knowledge" of which she had been deprived as a child³⁸⁷ turns, once in print, into an uncanny indictment of that same society which inflicted economic and sexual slavery and genocidal policies of segregation and assimilation on its native population. By the token of her Western training, Morgan resorts to scientific method, such as the use of documentary evidence and Native informants in her (re)search, in order to de-fictionalise and give historical weight to her account, and ease it into the mainstream. She aptly employs White scholarly strategies in uncovering the bare facts about Aboriginal Australia by using the resources of Perth's Battye Library, dedicated to Western-Australian history. Although she finds out that there is much history available in official files that mainstream Australia ought to be "ashamed"³⁸⁸ of, substantial amounts still remain policed, silenced and covered up:

³⁸⁴ Trees 1992: 56-7. See also Muecke 1988: 410 and Newman 1992: 67-9.

³⁸⁵ Trees 1992: 55.

³⁸⁶ Collingwood-Whittick 2002: 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 Works Cited: "palimpsest").

³⁸⁷ Wright 1988: 94.

³⁸⁸ 151.

Well, there's nothing written from a personal point of view about Aboriginal people. All our history is about the white man. No one knows what it was like for us. 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. You take old police files, they're not even controlled by Battye library, they're controlled by the police. And they don't like getting them out, because there are so many instances of police abusing their power when they were supposed to be Protectors of Aborigines that it's not funny! I mean, our government had terrible policies for Aboriginal people. Thousands of families in Australia were destroyed by the government policy of taking children away. None of that happened to white people. I know Nan doesn't agree with what I'm doing. She thinks I'm trying to make trouble, but I'm not. I just want to try to tell a bit of the other end of the story.³⁸⁹

This uncanny void brings her to coaxing her mother, Gladys, and grandmother, Nan/Daisy, into talking about their past, often using trickster strategies to bend their determination not to reveal their secrets:³⁹⁰

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.*"³⁹¹

Thus, the narrative acquires a psychologising slant by concentrating on the emotional economy of family affairs, which causes it to drift into a more pronounced employment of the Gothic. It is precisely this uncanny uncovering of previously hidden knowledge, the disquieting coming into presence of a ghost from the Aboriginal past, which also opens up an inscription of this instance of Aboriginal life-writing into the female Gothic as a strategy of subversion.

³⁸⁹ 164.

³⁹⁰ Elder 1992: 22.

³⁹¹ 135 (my emphasis).

In a broad discussion of the genre, Maggie Kilgour points out that the Gothic as well as the Romantic novel came into existence in reaction to Enlightenment literature, the former functioning as the dark foil to the latter, with which it shared “an interest in 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, in which subconscious psychic energy bursts out from the restraints of the conscious ego.” Other, more mystic-spiritual views have seen 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.” This, symbolically, makes the Gothic “the rebellion of the imagination against the tyranny of reason.” A last, socio-historic reading sees the rise of the Gothic as an expression of the developments of the middle-class and the novel proper.³⁹² *My Place* fits into this wide-ranging framework in various ways because it can be alternatively taken as the psychological return of a repressed Indigenous past, the spiritual return of the Aboriginal sacred, a product of the development of an Aboriginal middle class, and a postcolonising experiment with novelistic form.

As to the *female* Gothic, Gerry Turcotte interprets the destabilisation or re-appropriation of the Gothic genre by contemporary female writers as a way “to comment on those ‘systems’ that institutionalise and perpetuate imperialist, sexist, or so-called ‘normative’ values,” but observes that they tend “to celebrate female experience ... in decidedly negative terms.”³⁹³ According to Maggie Kilgour the latter ambiguity, which fails to signal a way out of oppression, is typical for the Gothic. The genre originally staged the tensions between a reactionary Enlightenment moral and the revolutionary aesthetic values of Romanticism. This was an ambiguity which could never be resolved because both were bourgeois inventions, although some critics refute these materialist grounds and simply hold that “Gothic novelists didn’t know what to do with their own feelings of frustration and rebelliousness.” The resulting *classic* female Gothic agenda was written by Ann Radcliffe, the most celebrated 18th century Gothic writer in English. She used the mode to present a momentary, terrifying subversion and subsequent restoration of (domestic) order for the tale’s heroine as well as its female reader, both of whom would “naturally” celebrate the return to the patriarchal norm after all the horror

³⁹² Kilgour 1995: 3-4.

³⁹³ Turcotte 1995: 65-9.

experienced. This would turn reading into “a dangerously conservative substitute for political and social action, offering an illusory transformation to impede real change by making women content with their lot.”³⁹⁴ However, it has also been suggested that the Gothic has been employed successfully as a strategy of female subversion, revealing patriarchal constraints on woman’s freedom. As Kilgour puts it:

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.³⁹⁵

The resulting postmodern female agenda is highly ambiguous: born out of the rise of the middle classes, the Gothic may be employed as a strategy of female subversion to reveal patriarchal oppression, which in the postcolonial context may be understood to overlap with racial constraints, but at the same time it “rarely moves towards conclusions, or, if it does, it signals either overtly or covertly the failure of closure.”³⁹⁶

This ambivalence is also evident in *My Place*: while Sally engages with the ghost of racialized gender oppression and discovers her Aboriginality, the latter’s articulation is often perceived as lacking political engagement and announcing a return to the mainstream order. Likewise, the text refuses to unveil all the secrets of the family’s past, and Nan’s death turns into the narrative’s conclusion *in medias res*. Foremost, Gothic lack of closure operates in Sally’s confrontations with hidden knowledge, whose silencing is verbally and visually inscribed in the narrative. Her grandmother’s evasive non-communication turns into an insurmountable barrier on her quest to knowledge, and Sally has to use Western slight of hand to make the incest issue surface. She resorts to the ‘ethnographic’ evidence of photographs in order to articulate Aboriginality, allowing her to put faces to the ghosts of her family’s Aboriginal past and to close in on its dark secret. Gladys’s hunch that Howden Drake-Brockman could have been her father—a belief she held as a child but has repressed in adulthood—is confirmed by Sally in a mirror scene in which Gladys appears as the uncanny dark double of her white (grand)father: ‘Suddenly,

³⁹⁴ Kilgour 1995: 8.

³⁹⁵ Kilgour 1995: 9 (Kilgour’s emphasis).

³⁹⁶ Turcotte 1995: 83.

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!"³⁹⁷

While the text necessarily insists on these visual markers of kinship in the absence of verbal clues, Morgan and the publisher initially avoided including family pictures in *My Place*. Although this could have heightened the documentary truth effect of the text by providing what to Othello was the "ocular proof" of an illicit relationship,³⁹⁸ they preferred to inscribe the novel into the Aboriginal story-telling tradition rather than social history,³⁹⁹ priming the Aboriginal word over the White gaze.⁴⁰⁰ Thus, it could also be argued that Morgan meant to offer some protection from scrutinizing mainstream eyes as their lives were being "paraded" in the novel according to Gladys.⁴⁰¹ As Sidonie Smith says, "[i]n post/colonial locations such as Australia, family photos can ... become highly contested documents because disturbing questions arise about who's in whose family."⁴⁰²

While such a protective measure might have served the story's protagonists to guarantee some kind of agency over their own lives, nevertheless a rare, illustrated hardbound edition with 16 black and white photographs was put into print two years after its first publication.⁴⁰³ However, the joint textual and visual data of this edition allow Sidonie Smith to deliver a pervasive, *deconstructive* critique within the authenticity debate and to dislocate 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 place and out of place while performing White and Aboriginal features and addressing issues of race, gender and class simultaneously.⁴⁰⁴ The physical inscription of Aboriginality onto the body voices the

³⁹⁷ 237.

³⁹⁸ William Shakespeare, *Othello* III, iii, 365.

³⁹⁹ Wright 1988: 102; Elder 1992: 17.

⁴⁰⁰ Stephen Muecke writes that Aboriginal history relies on the word through chains of custodianship, whereas White history on the gaze following a realist aesthetic (1992: 71).

⁴⁰¹ Wright 1988: 97.

⁴⁰² Smith 1994:530.

⁴⁰³ A "Family Album" of photographs was appended to the 1989 "Illustrated" hardbound edition of *My Place* (Smith 1994: 527).

⁴⁰⁴ Sidonie Smith writes: "Historically, genres of photographs have produced 'authentic' 'aboriginality' in multiple registers—as a repertoire of 'everyday' activities; a nostalgic reverie for a vanishing people; a catalog of the truly primitive ... Ethnographers in particular, often complicit with certain colonialist practices, have drawn upon photography to present images of the pure and the impure, the authentic and the inauthentic. Morgan, piecing together her own history of becoming black out of the gaps in the family album, becomes the lay ethnographer, displacing and implicitly critiquing ethnography's expertise and its white lies. Through her narrative construction of a counter family history and the alternative family album she assembles, Morgan posits her Aboriginality as an identity originating in her matrilineal heritage and socially confirmed in her identification with and acknowledgment by the community of Aboriginal people in Corunna Downs, her communal filiation. Yet the radically different experiential histories of Sally, Arthur, Gladys, and Daisy reveal that there is no pure or authentic position of Aboriginality as such; that

unspeakable secret that the family past holds and announces the failure of White politics of assimilation; Gladys realizes that “[i]t was 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.”⁴⁰⁵ Darkness of the skin is the very feature that Nan’s stubborn, defensive silence has tried to obliterate from the family’s selfperception, and which Sally for so long has gullibly bought into:

“You bloody kids don’t want me, you want a bloody white grandmother, I’m black. Do you hear, black, black, black!” With that, Nan pushed her chair back and hurried out to her room ... For the first time in my fifteen years, I was conscious of Nan’s colouring.⁴⁰⁶

One might, of course, ask what Sally’s innocence signifies: is her lack of understanding the touchstone for her mother and grandmother’s strategy of racial passing? Is it her denial of what is so visibly there? Why are her brothers and sisters so much more aware of their Indigenous ancestry and its implications?⁴⁰⁷ How can a person with a vested interest in the visual arts be ignorant of her grandmother’s factions and skin colour?⁴⁰⁸ Or is this an authorial intervention in the service of narrative structure and development which inscribes the discovery of Aboriginality as a textual effect? How ‘authentic’ is Sally’s textual reconstruction of herself in this (con)text? Might it be that other narrative conventions question realist ones that inexorably lead to Western notions of truth?

the subjects of these narratives are multiply positioned, and that they make sense out of their past through narratives woven of discourses of class, gender, national identity, and generational differences, as well as discourses of Aboriginality ... *My Place* historicizes Aboriginal identities and differences even as it posits a fixed Aboriginal identity. “Texts such as *My Place*,” suggests Gareth Griffiths, “deny the myth of authenticity, its authority over the subjected whilst simultaneously recognising the crucial importance of recovering a sense of difference and identity” ... But, as the vigorous debate generated around the publication and broad distribution of *My Place* suggests, they also raise vexing questions about identity politics and about contested definitions of Aboriginality. As text and photographs document Morgan’s Aboriginality, they simultaneously document her persisting assimilated otherness and the forms of autobiographical performativity she inherits with that otherness ... From the photos of the smiling ‘assimilated’ child, across the album’s divide of the history of settler families, to the ‘Aboriginal’ woman smiling among her kin, Morgan remains both/and rather than either ‘white’ or Aboriginal. The other always remains in the album” (1994: 533-4).

⁴⁰⁵ 278.

⁴⁰⁶ 97.

⁴⁰⁷ 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...’” (98).

⁴⁰⁸ Morgan has long been professionally active as a painter, and provided the cover painting to *My Place*’s original edition.

Indeed, the fictional slip from Western autobiography into a framework of postcolonial female Gothic is consumed when Sally decides to hunt the Aboriginal spectre at the homestead, which can only be captured by breaking through the wall of silence both her mother and grandmother put up. Haunted by the fear of the politics of separation and assimilation and the shame of incest, Nan is locked into the family home and materializes as the silent, undead ghost that defamiliarises Sally from her perceived identity as an ‘Indian.’ It is necessarily at her home that Sally’s textual and geographical search, after a long journey through Battye library and into the Pilbara district, comes full circle. The homestead becomes increasingly unfamiliar and inscribed in the uncanny as Nan ferociously guards her secrets⁴⁰⁹ by her retreat from the public eye and from Sally’s insistence on communication:

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.⁴¹⁰

Thus, the terrible (white, dark?) secret haunting the narrative is staged in a Gothic setting of domesticity; however, the intent to break out of this prison also turns the text into a postcolonising project of re-inventing Aboriginal orature where the native transmission of knowledge has been interrupted.

3.3.1. Ghosts or guardians?

In mediating between Western writing and Aboriginal orature, *My Place* turns into a self-referential text, not only in tracing its own steps in the process of writing,⁴¹¹ but also in addressing ways of incorporating Indigenous forms of story-telling and authorship into its pages. Breaking the silence is the very key to orature, but silence is also, ironically enough, that feature of Aboriginality that “represents most surely the traditional Aboriginal heritage that Morgan wishes to uncover and convey.”⁴¹² That is, the

⁴⁰⁹ Elder 1992: 17.

⁴¹⁰ 145.

⁴¹¹ Cf. Elder 1992: 19.

⁴¹² Elder 1992: 17.

transmission of knowledge is based on custodianship and secrecy, and authorship is thus inscribed in a communal tradition of sharing rather than individual creative effort. In order to gain access to stories/knowledge, the correct conditions of its transmission need to obtain, which links in with notions of ritual and sacredness. Stephen Muecke says to this effect that “Aboriginal societies ... do not recognise a category ‘fiction’ ... It would seem, then, that all Aboriginal oral narrative is ‘true’ in their sense of the word if it does not fall into the ‘Dreaming’ category.”⁴¹³ He asserts that the stories produced by Aboriginal oral narrative:

...are all true to the extent that the discourse is correctly produced within the cultural apparatuses which make it possible ... And 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 ... There is no specific discourse which produces the truth effects of dominant Western historical discourse with its usual communicative devices of exact chronology, emphasis on the role of important individuals, cross-referencing to ‘official’ sources, ethnographic selection of detail ... But 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.⁴¹⁴

Crucially, the ‘historical truth’ of Aboriginal 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*,”⁴¹⁵ and the latter characteristic explains the importance of Arthur’s exclamation “Don’t go takin’ the word of white people against mine”⁴¹⁶ when he establishes Howden Drake-Brockman as his and Nan’s father. Conversely, it is considered “a serious transgression of

⁴¹³ Muecke 1992: 65-6.

⁴¹⁴ Muecke 1992: 89-90.

⁴¹⁵ Muecke 1992: 71.

⁴¹⁶ Morgan 1988: 157.

Aboriginal 'copyright' to speak unlawfully a text which 'belongs' to someone else."⁴¹⁷ Thus, Arthur warns Sally, who acts as a "bloody detective,"⁴¹⁸ on several occasions that certain information cannot be revealed unless her grandmother herself chooses to do so. Uncannily, Nan's female experience is 'sacralized'; it is enveloped in multiple layers of silence precisely because of the immense damage inflicted by her contact with White culture, which has *desacralized* her very sexuality in the act of interracial rape and incest. In the (con)text of *My Place* native female experience is tainted by a Western patriarchal/racist secret upon which the narrative slowly encroaches, and Nan's "brick wall"⁴¹⁹ metaphorically configures defensive silence as the text's most outstanding Indigenous feature.⁴²⁰ Thus, "Nan maintained a position of non-co-operation, insisting that the things she knew were secrets and not to be shared with others."⁴²¹

Logically, then, a minimally successful construction of Sally's Aboriginal Place must involve a "deferment of (narrative) authority,"⁴²² which sees Morgan increasingly relinquish her own voice to favour those of others as Native silences are broken along the chain of custodianship of knowledge that must be scrupulously respected. Therefore, when Sally asks, "You know a lot about Nan, can't you tell us?" Arthur answers, "I'd like to, I really would, but I'd be breaking a trust ... There's some things Daisy's got to tell herself, or not at all. I can't say no more."⁴²³ Thus, shame (about Aboriginality and incest) and fear (of rejection and renewed impositions of policies of assimilation) are part of a Gothic return of the Aboriginal sacred in the shape of a postcolonial ghost, which uncannily inscribes 'truth' in the Native transmission and custodianship of sensitive knowledge rather than therapeutic solutions offered by Western psychology.⁴²⁴

The Indigenous critic Jackie Huggins is concerned by the fact that Sally's narrative frames and assimilates Aboriginal voices,⁴²⁵ but I would argue that Sally's narrative framework is the reflection of a growth process that shows her struggle with different discourses. It eventually refuses to subsume Aboriginal into Western experience, and consciously tries to make way for the voices of custodians of the past to arise: she fades out as o/thers fade in for the narrative to unfold correctly. The 'true' journey into the

⁴¹⁷ Muecke quotes from Sansom 1988: 24-5 (1992: 86).

⁴¹⁸ 238.

⁴¹⁹ Wright 1988:95.

⁴²⁰ Elder 1992: 17.

⁴²¹ 163.

⁴²² Muecke 1988: 415.

⁴²³ 158.

⁴²⁴ Interestingly, Morgan holds a postgraduate diploma in psychology by Curtin University.

⁴²⁵ Huggins 2003: 63.

family's past starts off with Sally's account, then Arthur's, later Gladys's, and is finally crowned by Nan, as silences are slowly being unravelled and taking the reader into Other understandings of the world. Although this is a contrived, "brilliant" structure, Morgan claims that "[n]ot a great deal of thought went into [it] ... [i]t took no time at all because it was the way the book naturally unfolded."⁴²⁶ This points towards its inscription in the Aboriginal oral tradition, heightened by an Aboriginal-inflected use of colloquial English. What individual 'data' Sally delivers towards the second half of the book only serve to pave the way for the emergence of Aboriginal voices, and, while her storytelling ambiguously straddles different genres, it is in line with Native notions of sharing and guarding knowledge.

Whereas Sally inscribes herself in Western ethnographic methods of knowledge-gathering by arming herself with a tape-recorder and transcribing her family's voices, her agenda defies a so-called objective, distant approach in being informed by political as well as personal concerns. Her project is not only born out of "anger" at the "injustice" of Aboriginal oppression but also at its silencing: "we had been deprived of ... crucial knowledge as children, and I didn't want my own children to be deprived."⁴²⁷ Parading as a Western autobiography, *My Place* therefore slowly evolves into a communal, polyphonic effort, more in tune with Native notions of custodianship of narrative as Sally's Aboriginal roots are revealed and as more witnesses/guardians of the past tell their stories. The breaking of silence articulates her account foremost along matrilineal lines because the greatest secret is, of course, the incest committed in Gladys's conception; this is precisely the site where the uncanny obtains most forcefully as secret, harmful knowledge that should never come to light. Accordingly, it is also Sally's grandmother's identity which is the most ambiguous and elusive of all. She is known by three names: Daisy, the name given to her by white society; Nan, which relates to her function as a nurse maid or nanny for the Drake-Brockmans; and Talahue, the Aboriginal name which she is at pains to hide and only surfaces towards the end of *My Place*.⁴²⁸

This immense need for hiding personal experience explains why it is Arthur, Nan's brother, who is first to reveal some facts about the past. Evidently, his male inscription into Australian (textual) territory is racially problematic and locks him into the disadvantaged lower classes, but it is relatively untroubled by the gender oppression his

⁴²⁶ Bird & Haskell 1992: 8.

⁴²⁷ Wright 1988: 94.

⁴²⁸ See Morgan 1988: 148 and 325. The French translation of *My Place* bears the title *Talahue*, drawing attention to the real narrative centre of the text.

female kin were to suffer. Unaffected by the shame and fear of his female peers and proud of the achievements of a life as a black battler, his awareness of personal story and injustice as larger history and therefore his willingness to talk are acute: “the black man remembers these things. The black man’s got a long memory.”⁴²⁹ Inscribing personal memory/story as historical evidence, he takes issue with the Great Australian Silence and turns into the supportive catalyst of Sally’s project of historical recovery:⁴³⁰

I want my story finished. I want everyone to read it. Arthur Corunna’s story! I might be famous. You see, it’s important, 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.⁴³¹

In order to achieve this aim, Arthur entrusts his story to his niece in the tradition of Aboriginal custodianship: “I told you my story now. You’ll look after it, won’t you?”⁴³²

Set in the period from 1893 to 1950, his tale gives account of a black battler life, in which his physical prowess and stamina allow him to cope with White abuse and engrained racism; he manages to make a living for himself and, in a reversal of Native dispossession, to turn into a small landowner—Mukinbudin station is “more than what most blackfellas got,” and it is the place he returns to die.⁴³³ His insertion in the White world even sees the load of racial oppression occasionally fall from his shoulders; when reminiscing his successful boxing days, he exclaims, “I was a white man, then, not black. It was a king’s life,” and he highlights his success with women.⁴³⁴

However, the overall image his story conjures up is one of barely disguised slavery, in which the black male’s expectations towards an independent life are heavily undermined by an overlap of race and class oppression. Economic exploitation is evident when he toils for White farmers earning hardly any or no money at all, and when after hard toil he manages to buy a farm, his White neighbours’ racist attitude is blatant: “Men teased me when I bought the farm, they didn’t want a blackfella movin’ in ... When I should have had sheep, they wouldn’t give me any, because my colour wasn’t right.

⁴²⁹ 210.

⁴³⁰ Bird & Haskell 1992: 3.

⁴³¹ 212-3.

⁴³² 166.

⁴³³ 147.

⁴³⁴ 204.

Everybody else got them, not me.”⁴³⁵ Arthur realizes that he “was doin’ the work and they was getting the profits”⁴³⁶ when his White neighbours steal his cattle and trick him into sharing his farm in an intent to cash in on his success. This awareness of race and class oppression takes him to the following neo-colonial indictment of mainstream Australia:

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 [*sic*] had land rights since this country was invaded, our land rights. Most of the land the Aborigine wants, no white man would touch.⁴³⁷

This insistence on the truth about Australia’s past ties in strategically with Arthur’s revelation that Alfred Howden Drake-Brockman fathered him and Nan by Annie Padewani, the wife of a local Aboriginal leader. When Sally tentatively concludes “you reckoned he fathered the both of you,” he points at the traditional function of Aboriginal orature for transmitting facts:

By Jove he did! Are you gunna take the word of white people against your own flesh and blood? 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,

⁴³⁵ 207.

⁴³⁶ 208.

⁴³⁷ 212-3.

we went by his name, but later, after he married his first wife, Nell, he changed our names.⁴³⁸

But this revelation also shows how Arthur and Nan had to change identities in order to keep up the White lie about black velvet, on which their survival in the colonial world depended. Arthur's Aboriginal 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 Daisy Corunna. In line with the secrecy reigning in Nan's life, her Aboriginal name is only unveiled towards the end of *My Place*, and earlier in the text the threat of its revelation is strategically employed by Arthur to create a narrative space for himself:

“If you don't go, Daisy, I'll tell them your Aboriginal name”. Nan was furious. “You wouldn't!” she fumed ... “What is it?” both Mum and I asked excitedly after she'd gone. “No, I can't tell you”, he said, “... Daisy should tell you herself. There's a lot she could tell you, she knows more about some of our people than I do”⁴³⁹

Arthur Corunna's death soon after his oral testament causes intense feelings of loss and incompleteness in Sally and her mother. With Nan unwilling to cooperate, it triggers their desire to go on a quest for wholeness: to retrieve the family line they will visit Corunna Downs station in the northern Pilbara District. This, in turn, causes the Aboriginal ghost to haunt the home with even more intensity: “[a]s the time for us to leave drew near, Nan became more and more outspoken in her opposition. Apart from threatening us with cyclones, flooded rivers and crocodiles, she tried to convince us that, while we were away, something terrible would happen to her,”⁴⁴⁰ but home will not be turned into a domestic prison for the future pilgrims. Their tentative journey into knowledge tries to reverse the trails of assimilation:

... hundreds of kids gone from here. Most never come back. We think maybe some of them don't want to come home. Some of those light ones, they don't

⁴³⁸ 157.

⁴³⁹ 148.

⁴⁴⁰ 216.

want to own us dark ones ... People like you, wanderin' around, not knowin' where you come from. Light coloured ones wanderin' around, not knowin' they black underneath. Good on you for comin' back, I wish you the best.⁴⁴¹

And the postcolonial 'songline' finally leads back to a suffused romantic vision of the old station in stark contrast with Nan's 'ugly' description of this locus of Aboriginal dispossession:

We were both trying to imagine what it would have been like for the old people in the old days. Soft, blue hills completely surrounded the station. They seemed to us mystical and magical. We easily imagined Nan, Arthur, Rosie, Lily and Albert, sitting exactly as we were now, looking off into the horizon at the end of the day. Dreaming, thinking.

The nostalgic description together with the shortness of their stay signals a re-inscription of their destination which uncomfortably shuttles 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."⁴⁴² This somewhat disturbing, transcendental manoeuvre also manifests itself in the re-establishment of the family links, whose boisterous "[w]e had an Aboriginal consciousness now, and we're proud of it"⁴⁴³ comes too quickly to allow an inscription of Aboriginality beyond genetics. Indeed, it is in contradiction with Arthur's historical analysis of Aboriginality as lived experience, especially where Sally is concerned. Similarly, 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."⁴⁴⁴ Nevertheless, this rash result of their "spiritual and emotional pilgrimage,"⁴⁴⁵ the increasing likelihood of the incest hypothesis, and the suspicion that Gladys has more siblings 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

⁴⁴¹ 222.

⁴⁴² 229-30.

⁴⁴³ 231-3 (my emphasis).

⁴⁴⁴ Cf. Huggins 2003: 63.

⁴⁴⁵ 233.

someone like me ... Perhaps my sister will read it.”⁴⁴⁶ This is in line with Arthur’s agenda of denunciation, with the added personal twist of the Stolen Generations issue.

Gladys Corunna’s story, spanning the period 1931-83, testifies to the racist politics of separation and assimilation first imposed by Augustus O. Neville, Chief Protector of the Aborigines in Western Australia from 1915 to 1940.⁴⁴⁷ It also exemplifies the related problematics of racial passing in her marriage with Bill Milroy. Gladys’s youth is a long account of the Native Welfare’s Department’s control over Aboriginal family units, whose notorious eugenic policies were meant to ease the Aboriginal race to what was deemed its inevitable extinction and, accordingly, ‘save’ children of ‘mixed blood’ by assimilating them into the mainstream.⁴⁴⁸ 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 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.⁴⁴⁹

Racial conditioning in the public sphere strategically links up with private policies of racial, sexual and class differentiation. On one of her scarce visits to Corunna Downs, Alice Drake-Brockman gives a beautiful white doll to her daughter June and a black one, dressed as a servant, to Gladys, which greatly upsets the latter:

That’s me, I thought, I wanted to be a princess, not a servant ... I couldn’t help flinging it onto the floor and screaming, “I don’t want a black doll, I

⁴⁴⁶ 236-8.

⁴⁴⁷ Reynolds 2005: 216.

⁴⁴⁸ Cf. Anderson 2003: 45-6.

⁴⁴⁹ 64-5.

don't want a black doll". Alice just laughed and said to my mother, "Fancy, her not wanting a black doll."⁴⁵⁰

Thus, Gladys's future is projected in ways similar to Daisy's, whose economic exploitation by the Drake-Brockmans is intensified by keeping her from building even the slightest rudiments of a family nucleus, first at Corunna Downs and later near Perth.

While Gladys is depicted as yet another battler, hard-working and successful as a florist, her marriage to a White working-class outcast locks her into an uncanny downward spiral of racial and gender violence. Bill Milroy is an ex prisoner of war of Anglo-Celtic descent who has been through terrible, undigested experiences in German concentration camps. Long dead, he does not acquire his own voice in the narrative, but his story is strategically framed into Gladys's. It appeals to a White understanding of the Aboriginal plight by offering a mainstream example of the excessive damage inflicted by racial violence, a parallel which is teased out by Bill's haunting imprisonment near a Jewish extermination camp⁴⁵¹ and by the internment of Aborigines during WWII by A.O. Neville.⁴⁵² However, Bill's ghostly life as a beaten battler also further highlights the resilience of the Aboriginal protagonists of *My Place*, whose uncanny survival and progress defy the predictions of the Social-Darwinist doomed-race theory. Bill Milroy is a failure as a husband and described as "the absent male ... physically ... as well as emotionally."⁴⁵³ Constantly out of work and often hospitalized, he is a chronic drunk whose mental imbalance is never understood by the state as an illness caused by the war effort. At the root of his problems is the suggestion he was sodomized by a German officer, which inscribes the violence suffered into the terrain of sexuality and gender, and thus converges on Nan's secret:

Bill began having nightmares again. He'd suffered from them ever since he'd come back from the war. He'd scream and scream at night. I used to feel so sorry for him. Before we married, I had thought that the idea of being POW was something very heroic and romantic, now I thought differently ... I think there were some things that were too degrading for him to share. I knew

⁴⁵⁰ 262.

⁴⁵¹ 288.

⁴⁵² 211.

⁴⁵³ Bird & Haskell 1988: 7.

there had been one German commandant that had treated him really badly. Bill absolutely hated him ... Bill would never tell me what had happened.⁴⁵⁴

This uncanny knowledge Bill keeps to himself as Nan does with the incest issue. More uncannily even, as in Hofmann's Sand-Man story⁴⁵⁵ the very German officer who abused him appears in Perth under a different guise,⁴⁵⁶ which obviously disturbs him greatly. Like Nan, he locks himself into his room and eventually dies without relinquishing his secret.

Subtly, Gladys's account develops into a crucible of not only class and gender but also racial violence, and undercuts her act of racial passing. As the family struggles to keep its economy going (Gladys working double jobs and Nan having moved in to give a hand) and Bill's mental condition deteriorates, his racial prejudice against Aborigines increases. Thus, due to his mental instability Bill turns increasingly violent against his own kin, who are forced to spend nights at their neighbour's. As an eerie, uncanny ghost, he tries to lure Gladys and the family back home on those occasions:

“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.⁴⁵⁷

The state apparatus reinforces this unhealthy situation of Gothic persecution. Bill's legal position in child custody matters favours him over his part-Aboriginal wife, which effectively traps Gladys into the prison her home has become. 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 Aboriginal origins altogether. Ruled by fear and shame, Gladys and especially Nan reinstate the Gothic prison of domesticity for themselves, even long after the politics of assimilation have been abolished:

⁴⁵⁴ 282.

⁴⁵⁵ See chapter 2, pp. 45-6.

⁴⁵⁶ 283.

⁴⁵⁷ 294.

I tried to stay out of the way when Bill died. Gladdie could pass for anythin'. You only had to look at me to see I was native. We had to be careful. "Tell them they're Indian" I told her. "You don't want them havin' a bad time."⁴⁵⁸

To Gladys, breaking the silence is a final release from this imprisonment. It is a therapeutic, cathartic reckoning with the past which also depends on notions of responsibility for history and custodianship in entrusting her story to Sally:

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 cannot retract what has been written, *it's no longer mine*.⁴⁵⁹

Nan only decides to share her life's experience after a terminal illness has been detected in 1983, and even then her reserves are clearly expressed to Sally in her claim that "you don't know what a secret is." While this partly refers to the fear and shame instilled by the former politics of separation and assimilation—"Course [older Aboriginals] won't talk, Sally. They frightened. You don't know what it was like. You're too young"—there is the underlying non-Western tradition of secret/sacred knowledge and the conditions for its transmission, too.⁴⁶⁰ Thus, Nan commits herself to revealing some stories but burying essentials:

Well, Sal, that's all I'm gunna tell ya ... I got my secrets, I'll take them to the grave. Some things, I can't talk 'bout. Not even to you, my granddaughter. They for me to know. They not for you or your mother to know ... I think maybe this is a good thing you're doin' ... Could it's time to tell.⁴⁶¹

Nan's story runs from 1901 to 1983, the year of her death, and focuses mostly on the impact of child removal on herself and her children, and her insertion into the Drake-Brockman family economy. Fathered by the White patriarch, Talahue was soon separated from her Aboriginal mother, and inserted as Daisy into the group of 'half-

⁴⁵⁸ 348.

⁴⁵⁹ 305 (my emphasis).

⁴⁶⁰ 319.

⁴⁶¹ 349.

caste' house Natives, who enjoyed higher status than the 'full-blood' camp Natives. As a teenager the rupture with her Aboriginal kin is consumed when the Drake-Brockmans take her to Ivanhoe estate east of Perth and put her to work as a servant and nanny to the children. Her work as a child carer articulates her third and last(ing) identity—Nan—which has floated from racial to class inscription according to the dictates of assimilation. The racial-economic basis of exploitation underlying her relationship with the wealthy upper-class Drake-Brockmans is obscured in the matriarch's claim that "[w]e'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.⁴⁶²

'White lies' such as Alice Drake-Brockman's are strategically employed against Nan to ensure the continuation of the family's White (moral) economy, which sacks and reemploys her at their convenience and separates her from her daughter Gladys in a regime close to slavery. Thus, her account turns into an indictment of the politics of racial segregation and assimilation. It takes issue with the fear, shame and division they instilled amongst people of Native descent, and the destructive overlaps they generated in the terrains 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

⁴⁶² 334.

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.⁴⁶³

What arises out of this polyphonic narrative framework and the multiple indictments of White society its Aboriginal voices convey is a text that inscribes both a Gothic haunting of the mainstream conscious and the Indigenous custodianship of a past silenced but never forgotten. The main participants in this process of recovering the historical memory of Aboriginal op/repression soon die after giving their testimony; however, their undead ghosts live on in these pages and sound a warning at the mainstream's self-interested forgetfulness, breaking the great Australian silence on the nation's past, and thus turning into its guardians. *My Place* draws on the Aboriginal Sacred/Secret to preserve historic memory, re-inscribe hidden, repressed Indigenous knowledge into the Gothic gaps in the text and rewrite the palimpsest of invasion history imprinted upon the Australian text/landscape. Moreover, it does so in a manner compatible with my definition of Postcolonising Dreaming Narrative as an Indigenous-Australian literary genre engaged in the process of Aboriginal identity formation.

3.3.2. Productive promiscuities

In the light of the previous discussion, an understanding of Morgan's narrative as a promiscuous straddling of Western literary genres and the Aboriginal story-telling tradition may offer a way of dealing with the many problems the text's interpretation poses. These conflictive issues do not only arise out of its treatment of historical fact through a perceived use of 'fiction' for its transmission, but also out of the articulation of the author's Aboriginal identity, whose inscription in this autobiographical text is, as well as the narrative itself, affected by Gothic lack of closure.

The joint reliance on the genre of Western autobiography, furnished with "quasi-documentary or historical truth effects,"⁴⁶⁴ and Aboriginal orature, conveying Indigenous truths through notions of oral custodianship of secret/sacred information, bridges the

⁴⁶³ Morgan 1988: 336-7.

⁴⁶⁴ Muecke 1988: 409.

'racial' difficulties that the use of narration poses to scientific considerations of history. This merger is achieved not only through a racial but also female inscription of the text that blurs the borders of the conventional category of fiction and productively engages with other genres. Thus, it sees o/Other truths arise in the very liminality of its definition, which promiscuously spills over into other traditional terrains of knowledge and rewrites them, turning contact histories into Contact History. Furthermore, generic promiscuity counters the insidious incestuous effects of the White paternal policing of knowledge, which, at bottom, should be considered unproductive in that it only serves the interests of the powers that be. Freud's notion of incest, of course, receives an uncanny twist in *My Place* in that it is not the hypothetical son that desires and begets the mother and subverts paternal authority, but the father who takes the daughter and reinforces his control over available female stock along racial lines. This unspeakable secret should never surface, and can only be dealt with by re-inscribing both the autobiographical structure and the identity formation it represents into Indigeneity. Thus, the Native critic Marcia Langton writes that *My Place* deals with "concealing not the 'Aboriginality' of the family, but the origins of the family in incest."⁴⁶⁵

The lack of closure that uncannily haunts the text and its author's identity has its roots in sexual taboo, and therefore Wenche Ommundsen concludes that:

[t]he 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 ... *[R]eal* 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.⁴⁶⁶

Crucially, then, the pain- and shameful incest question that riddles Morgan's family's origins and identity plight is never answered, but need not be solved as long as the Aboriginal heritage is safeguarded so that further emotional damage may be avoided.

⁴⁶⁵ Langton 2003: 117.

⁴⁶⁶ Ommundsen 1993: 262-3.

Thus, Nan ends up acknowledging that Alfred Howden Drake-Brockman, the White family patriarch, is her own father, but refuses to reveal her daughter's biological origins. This assertion of Aboriginality appropriately takes place at the level of identity as well as genre by an inscription into Aboriginal orature and the concomitant figures of custodians who guard knowledge. Nan's insistence on keeping the incest secret acquires further uncanny profile by some revelations a decade after the publication of *My Place*.

In 1999, Sally Morgan stated that her grandmother must have had at least *six* children, intimating they may have been fathered by Alfred Howden Drake-Brockman, which would turn the situation of interracial rape and incest structural in Nan's life. This sexual availability would also explain why she alone of all the available servants was to accompany the Drake-Brockman family away from Corunna Downs. All of Nan's six children were removed according to the dictates of official race policy and the Drake-Brockmans' private interests; by the time of the interview Sally's mother was still haunted by this obscure past, involved in uncovering the lost family connections.⁴⁶⁷ In the light of these revelations, it is not surprising that Howden's legitimate White daughter 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." Already in her eighties, Judith Drake-Brockman published her memoirs in 2001, entitled *Wongi Wongi* (i.e. *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' honour. At this stage, the Drake-Brockmans were asking for a DNA test, which once again inscribes the question of race into the reductive field of genetics and "blood lines."⁴⁶⁸ This long-lived intent at whitewashing goes to show how difficult Reconciliation is to implement once it reaches the sensitive level of the private sphere, and how lack of closure keeps affecting Native/non-Native contact history.

Another issue that therefore arises most forcefully out of the text and has haunted Native and non-Native critical discussion alike is Morgan's articulation of Aboriginal identity in *My Place*, which is "forged through the creation of the text rather than the reverse."⁴⁶⁹ Out of a genetically-ordained mysticism she constructs Aboriginality as a

⁴⁶⁷ Laurie 1999.

⁴⁶⁸ Dally 1997-2006.

⁴⁶⁹ Bain Attwood quoted by Huggins 2003: 61.

sudden coming into consciousness on her journey to the Pilbara and into old family connections, and is accompanied by dream visions, premonitions and the Aboriginal bird motif that punctuate the narrative and indicate important changes in the family's life. This need for transcendentalism is logical as Morgan's inscription into Aboriginality is not based on her own lived experience but on the experience passed on by her older family members. Mysticism is therefore nostalgically embedded into 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 giving testimony of their life (hi)stories. This may give rise to an uncanny reading in which *My Place* signals towards stasis rather than political engagement. Death's "apolitical otherness," as Edward Hills writes, gestures towards society's negation of "the change that should result from the details of their stories ... bury[ing] the past with the dead ... reforc[ing] conformity to a generic and cultural status quo."⁴⁷⁰ Death in this vision is stiflingly unproductive, the absolute end for Aboriginality. It offers mainstream society the 'doomed race's' generous and long-awaited gesture of disappearing from Australian (textual) territory in its pernicious 'pure' forms, and allows lighter-skinned natives of 'mixed blood' to be de-Aboriginalised by assimilation into the White mainstream. This would effectively see the guardians of the past as ghosts locked in 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 uncannily read as a return to the appeased conscience of Our Mainstream Place, well accompanied by the generosity and lack of bitterness Arthur, Gladys and Sally display. Indeed, all three seem in favour of making reconciliatory gestures towards White Australia, which, though well-meant, may sometimes unintentionally feed into White attitudes of denialism:⁴⁷¹

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 amongst the upper classes. I could understand the effects these attitudes 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*

⁴⁷⁰ Hills 1997: 108.

⁴⁷¹ See chapter 2, p.78 for a good example of White denialism from PM John Howard's 1999 *Motion of Reconciliation*.

*unfair of me to judge Alice's attitudes from my standpoint in the nineteen eighties.*⁴⁷²

However, as a text embedded in the ambiguous and disquieting socio-historic context of Australian nation-building in the 1980s, engaged readings are possible too, born out of the agency conferred by the 'hybrid' Aborigine's existence in the liminality of a "cultural hiatus."⁴⁷³ From this borderline postcolonising space in which *My Place* inscribes itself, ghosts may still haunt the mainstream conscious as guardians of Native historic memory. Sheila Collingwood-Whittick points out that "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."⁴⁷⁴ Thus, it may be argued that Sally Morgan's inscription of very sensitive subject matter at a crucial moment of national self-awareness was an apt way to dis-cover to the nation at large what it refused to accept publicly, and made, however troubled perhaps, a first attempt to find a common ground for its treatment.

How difficult it must have been to reveal the (Ab)Original Sin in the Australian Garden of Eden to the vast body of mainstream readership. This has been shown in the haunting debates surrounding *My Place's* uncertain location, leading native and non-native criticism to question Morgan's and her text's political engagement and 'authenticity'. Joan Newman's 1992 essay reflects this impasse very well:

My Place has been read by tens of thousands of Australians, as well as by many readers in Britain and the United States of America. It is a much loved book. Many have been moved by the stories contained within it, and admire the narrative's tone, which is compassionate and generous, showing little anger and bitterness. 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 is insufficiently political, others will feel that they gain some insights into Aboriginal culture. Many

⁴⁷² 170 (my emphasis). See 210, 213 for Arthur; and 306 for Gladys.

⁴⁷³ Anderson 2003: 46. He takes his cue from A.P. Elkin, *The Australian Aborigines* 1979 (1961): 379-83.

⁴⁷⁴ Collingwood-Whittick 2002: 48.

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.⁴⁷⁵

Uncannily, Morgan's articulation of Aboriginality in *My Place* may be questioned by its double inscription in Native and non-Native 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."⁴⁷⁶ 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, but with some hindsight one should recognise that Morgan's text, despite being haunted by multiple lacks of closure, takes a meritorious though uncanny lead in addressing the painful, conflictive issue of mixed-descent Aborigines at a *postcolonising* moment of transition in Australian multiculturalism which ambiguously embeds post-assimilation discourse in notions of *post-* as historically *after* and conceptually *beyond*.

3.4. An Aboriginal Woman's Success Story?

So with hindsight, does Morgan's text project a Gothic return to the mainstream norm for its uncanny Aboriginal ghosts, or does it beckon towards a preservation of historic memory and hence to political action to rupture that norm? Both the danger of "death's apolitical otherness" and the possibility for a re-articulation of Aboriginality have been left by Arthur and Nan in the narrative as their legacy of resistance to the nation, just before dying of natural causes in old age,⁴⁷⁷ 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 uncannily circulate through each other and prevent the text's and identity's closure. Thus, in the text, Sally's articulation of Aboriginality is positioned between the recovery of historic memory (the guardian who "would never forget"⁴⁷⁸) and transcendentalism (the ghost beckoning from the beyond: "I heard [the

⁴⁷⁵ Newman 1992: 73-4.

⁴⁷⁶ Collingwood-Whittick 2002: 49.

⁴⁷⁷ 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" (145).

⁴⁷⁸ 354.

Aboriginal bird call], too. In my heart, I heard it”⁴⁷⁹). Meanwhile, Gladys’s vision of Aboriginality 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.⁴⁸⁰

However, the writer Kevin Gilbert, also of mixed Aboriginal and Anglo-Celtic descent, received the following response to the nature of Aboriginality from a traditional elder, which breaks away from essentialism and primes agency and inclusion. Building from the old community tradition, it articulates an inscription of Aboriginality 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 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 amongst themselves, than the Aboriginal people will never climb back out of hell.⁴⁸¹

⁴⁷⁹ 357.

⁴⁸⁰ 305.

⁴⁸¹ This elder’s eloquence deserves full mention: “Aboriginality, eh? You say you want your Aboriginality back? That means having some rules, don’t it? And the first two orders of those rules is *share* and *care*. You just go back a little bit in time when we weren’t quite as broken as we are now [*gives some examples*] ... I don’t care how hard it is. You *build* Aboriginality, boy, or you got nothing. There’s no other choice to it. It’ll be easier, now, with bits of land handed back to us, here ‘n there. It means there’s no white manager for the people to dob each other in to. It means that you collect your own rents to do your own maintenance. You form a committee to collect the rent. If a family won’t pay, you throw them out. You get the young blokes to set up youth committees that backs the elders up. You inspect the houses because rules save lives and health and happiness. You give every man, woman and child his due because life is sacred. You treat your own and every life like that. Every person is entitled to be treated with good nature and

In line with such an articulation of Aboriginality as “social practice, with lived responsibilities and shared histories,”⁴⁸² the Indigenous critic 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. Thus, she asks: “[h]as 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.”⁴⁸³

Huggins’ essay was first published in 1993, and on its re-issue the editor, Michele Grossman, noted that Morgan had indeed made a commitment with such a communal cause in the fifteen years that had passed since *My Place*’s first appearance. While involved in school workshops with Aboriginal children at an earlier stage,⁴⁸⁴ in 1997 a native lobby including Sally Morgan 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 Morgan herself. Its main focus of research being on Aboriginal oral history and arts, Morgan points out that the Centre has been instrumental in breaking down the barriers between Aboriginal people and university, helping Stolen Generation people to

dignity. You never steal from the poor. If you steal from a black family you get cast out. If you stand over or hoon from the goonees [*Indigenous alcoholics*] you get bottled or kicked. If a woman neglects her kids, the women belt her. If a black boy rapes a black girl, he gets flogged and cast out. If two or men take a woman and abuse her they get flogged and cast out, so as to keep the camp clean. Every month every family cooks meat, pickles damper and pudding and the mission holds a corroboree dance in the fire-light. Every Sunday evening, the men light fires in the open and hold sing-songs because there is a lot of happiness in doing them. 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 ... Land? The five hundred tribes own all this land. That’s been taken but you have to get every area known as an Aboriginal reserve, all those little bits remembered as sacred sites and enough land besides that so that our people can have a land base for their needs, especially in the southern states where we were driven totally off our land. That’ll be your self-determination. It is not possible for anyone to love you unless you do something or are something worth loving. You can’t find happiness without first making rules to stamp out the things that make unhappiness. You can’t get dignity unless you follow the rules that help you to be dignified. You can’t find value in yourself until you build it by respecting yourself through living right. If you tolerate crumminess, gutlessness, meanness, wife bashing, kid bashing and neglect then you’ll never get the strength to climb out of hell ... If our people cannot change how it is amongst themselves, than the Aboriginal people will never climb back out of hell. Each Aboriginal has to be another Aboriginal’s keeper; each Aboriginal has to keep up the rules of right living because if we don’t do those things then our Aboriginality will die out ‘till there’s nothing left... like coals of a long-dead campfire” (Gilbert 1978: 304-5).

⁴⁸² Anderson 2003: 22.

⁴⁸³ Huggins 2003: 64.

⁴⁸⁴ Bird & Haskell 1992: 22.

trace their descent, and engaging in the protection of Aboriginal intellectual property rights in the field of the arts and Indigenous environmental issues.⁴⁸⁵ In 2009 the Centre is still up and running as part of the School of Indigenous Studies on campus at the University of Western Australia. Morgan has also remained active in the field of Indigenous literature as a university professor and writer, and has recently participated in the publication of an anthology of Indigenous-Australian writing entitled *Speaking from the Heart: Stories of Life, Family and Country* (Freemantle Arts Press 2007), which she has co-edited with Tjalaminu Mia and Blaze Kwaymullina.

Morgan's life is obviously a(n urban-Aboriginal) middle-class success story, but in the light of the previous not necessarily the disquieting sell-out to the mainstream that some non-Native and Native criticism proposed in the wake of *My Place's* publication. Particularly Mudrooroo's criticism of her autobiography as an individualist battler story⁴⁸⁶ has a disquieting essentialist ring of urban Aboriginal people as "culturally bereft, 'fake', or 'part-Aboriginies'." By scaling Aboriginality, it uncannily harks back to theories of the assimilation era that "expected" the Natives "to authenticate their Aboriginality in terms of percentages of blood or clichéd 'traditional' experiences."⁴⁸⁷ This is unproductive in that it would leave people 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 more-than-likely presence of an Aboriginal ancestor in his own immediate ancestry:

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 be 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.⁴⁸⁸

It seems better, therefore, to opt for an inscription of Aboriginality as social practice and commitment, and assess how over the years Morgan has performed on such

⁴⁸⁵ Laurie 1999.

⁴⁸⁶ See p.110 of this chapter.

⁴⁸⁷ Dodson 2003: 28.

⁴⁸⁸ Reynolds 2005: 238-9. Although Reynolds does not claim an Indigenous identity, one should note his long-standing professional commitment with the Aboriginal cause and his outstanding reputation as a humanist scholar.

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 identity⁴⁸⁹ that has brought her to strategic positions of influence and power in Australian society. This, in turn, allow her to feed back the advantages that come with her status as a successful female Native artist, writer and academic into the Indigenous community. Foremost, such a promiscuously productive reconfiguration of identity has been made possible by a re-inscription into Aboriginality as process rather than into the essentials of the incest issue, whose White lie and shame might have destroyed her and her family. The latter may explain why Morgan's family has never taken up the DNA challenge waged by the Drake-Brockmans: the Oedipal answer to the incest question simply lacks importance at the current stage of multicultural developments, a little more respectful with the Indigenous heritage. This is in line with current thinking about identity formation by Indigenous intellectuals, who articulate Aboriginality as a practice rooted in choice and descent, not in the biological-determinist 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."⁴⁹⁰

All of this goes to show that Morgan has engaged in the process of closing the multiple uncanny, painful gaps her autobiographical narrative left open in the fields of race, class and gender, which have haunted her narrative inscription so long and insistently. These ambiguities were born out of the aftermath of assimilation policies and the advent of more liberal, Aborigine-inclusive forms of multiculturalism in which the text and its author were embedded, and dislocated them as uncannily in and out of place in postcolonial Australia. But if identity formation in general and Aboriginality in particular are based on social practice rather than 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 first step in a process that later developments in her life have justified. This would also understand her 'promiscuous' postcolonising articulation of Aboriginality, straddling the traditional and modern, as no less valid or

⁴⁸⁹ 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 1992: 20-1).

⁴⁹⁰ Morrissey 2003: 59.

‘authentic’ than traditionalism and primitivism. As long as identities are defined as exclusionary categories, the descent of the Stolen Generations is likely to be riddled by uncanny questions about their identities, interests and motivations in contemporary Australia. Morgan, however, seems to have come a substantial way in mastering her uncanny ghosts, and, accordingly, the location of her *My Place* as a *strategic, postcolonising* position of engagement with the Indigenous cause in Australia’s multicultural land and text-scape feels more ascertained than two decades ago.

Chapter 4

Un/mastering Mudrooroo, Un-writing Black Man's Burden

"I ha[ve] discovered that identity is a fragile thing and can be taken away, just as it can be given"

(Mudrooroo 1997b: 263)

4.1. Mudrooroo's Burden of Representation

In the highly politicised configuration of post-Mabo Australia, individuals have inevitably fallen prey to the clashes of different, often opposed interests. Much of the tension surrounding the authenticity debate fleshed out in and around the person and work of Mudrooroo, who as an activist, writer and academic heavyweight has been singularly located in issues of Aboriginality, and who, incidentally, also participated in the aforementioned Oceania debate⁴⁹¹ as the only 'Aboriginal' participant. His Indigenous identity became heavily contested after an investigation into his genealogy had been published in a widely-read national newspaper in 1996.⁴⁹² As other public figures with presumed Indigenous roots were exposed to similar pressures of disqualification,⁴⁹³ the Mudrooroo case was not an idiosyncratic event, but should be

⁴⁹¹ See chapter 1, pp. 30-1.

⁴⁹² Laurie, Victoria. "Identity Crisis" *The Australian Magazine*, 20-1 July 1996: 28-32.

⁴⁹³ Adam Shoemaker mentions Archie Weller and Roberta Sykes in this respect (Shoemaker 2003: 13). The poet and author Roberta Sykes was born in 1943 in Townsville, Northern Queensland. Although she is the daughter of a White Australian mother and an African-American father, she has always identified as, and until recently was accepted as an Indigenous Australian. She has been a life-long campaigner for Indigenous land rights, 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. Penny van Toorn describes their identitarian trouble as follows: "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, 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. Robert Eggington insists on the importance of the Dumbartung protocols to identify those who illegitimately use "resources earmarked for our community." 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

placed in a general mainstream backlash against the recent political achievements of the Indigenous minority. John Howard's conservative government had just come to power after a landslide victory, and it should therefore come as no surprise that such an attack was directed against someone of an unusually high, politicised profile in Aboriginal matters. Mudrooroo had almost single-handedly taken upon himself to un-write the Western colonial discourse that, as exemplified in Rudyard Kipling's famous poem "White Man's Burden," aimed to justify Empire on altruistic grounds. This self-imposed obligation to undo the Master's discourse would turn against him through the public questioning of his Aboriginal identity—commonly known as the "Mudrooroo Affair"—and imbue what one might call his 'Black Man's Burden' with ambiguous content.⁴⁹⁴

Mudrooroo was born as Colin Johnson in 1938 near the town of Narrogin, in the Western Australian wheat belt, and for much of his life he considered himself kin to the local Nyoongar tribe of the Bibbulmun people. He has authored a wide-ranging and influential oeuvre in poetry, drama, prose fiction and essays, including what long went down as the first Aboriginal novel in Australia, *Wildcat Falling*, first published in 1965.⁴⁹⁵ As such, "he ha[s] been an inspiration and role model for two generations of Aboriginal people, especially for young Indigenous authors."⁴⁹⁶ Not only is he appreciated for the literary qualities of his work, but also well-known as a hardliner in Aboriginal affairs. His 1990 seminal study of Aboriginal literature, *Writing from the Fringe*, established the canons for Aboriginal literary criticism in what Adam Shoemaker can only describe as "restrictive, essentialist terms."⁴⁹⁷ Much cited in the latter sense is the harsh verdict Mudrooroo's study wields over Sally Morgan's autobiographical bestseller *My Place*, which deals with the identity plight arising from the Stolen Generations, racial 'passing' and recovery of Aboriginal roots.

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 Koolmatricie') who, while adopting Aboriginal pen-names, were never *involuntarily* interpellated as Aboriginal" (Van Toorn 2000: 42-3).

⁴⁹⁴ Kipling's poem was first published in the American political magazine *McClure's* in 1899, and motivated by the colonial war between the US and Spain in those days. It quickly became an icon of Western racism and Imperial sentiment, and still provokes academic discussion. Whereas Kipling depicts White man's burden as a Christian obligation to spread Western civilisation across the world, black man's burden could be understood as the black man's responsibility to undo the effects of Western colonisation.

⁴⁹⁵ 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.

⁴⁹⁶ Shoemaker 2003: 4.

⁴⁹⁷ Shoemaker 2003: 11.

Mudrooroo places *My Place* within a broader discussion of Aboriginal autobiographies, whose editorial production and marketing by “the majority culture” he terms “dubious” because it appears inspired by financial gain rather than genuine interest in the Aboriginal minority. He dedicates the following, rather disparaging words to Morgan’s novel:

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 milepost 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.⁴⁹⁸

Curiously, the qualification ‘battler’—i.e. a “[p]oor underprivileged person through the force of his or her own character makes it to the top through her own efforts”—could be as easily applied to Mudrooroo himself as to Morgan. As it is framed within an argument that aims to limit the merits of Morgan’s novel, the question arises what makes Mudrooroo and his fiction different. Mudrooroo brandishes his commitment with the Indigenous cause as the point of inflection, but this can be given a ‘darker’ reading if one takes into account that his criticism of *My Place* is directed against a lower middle-class woman writer. A further assessment of Native women’s writing in a chapter entitled ‘Women from the Fringe’ only saves Labumore’s novel out of three novels he considers representative.⁴⁹⁹

Only *An Aboriginal Mother Tells of the Old and the New* is political in the sense that it questions the very fact of white dominance in Australia. This is seen as a catastrophe. The other two texts are accommodating and seek to remove themselves from controversy. They reflect how things are and do not

⁴⁹⁸ Mudrooroo 1990: 149.

⁴⁹⁹ Apart from Sally Morgan’s *My Place*, he considers Ella Simon’s *Through My Eyes* (1987) and Labumore’s *An Aboriginal Mother Tells of the Old and the New* (1984) (Mudrooroo 1990: 158-63).

postulate any change in black/white relations in Australia; nor do they espouse any cause such as land rights, or for that matter feminism. *This may be a salient signifier of urban black women's writing.*⁵⁰⁰

His harsh positioning, mapping the Indigenous across gender and class in such unfortunate ways, has complicated and troubled his reading of Morgan's novel and inevitably raised outcries from feminist scholarship. Maureen Clark, a mainstream critic, sees Mudrooroo to be "particularly dogmatic and exclusive in his views on who should or should not inhabit Aboriginal cultural space." This she relates directly to a subject position based on his claim to authentic Indigenous ancestry "that has authorised him to speak for and on behalf of Australia's Aboriginal community."⁵⁰¹ Indirectly, of course, Clark takes issue with the extent to which Mudrooroo does or does not inscribe women in such an Indigenous cultural space. Mary Ann Hughes, on the other hand, shows understanding for the intransigent vein in Mudrooroo's theoretical works by alleging that "his position is a political strategy for promoting Aboriginal identity." She quotes the following statement by the author in support: "Aboriginal artists are socially committed, and therefore [should] have this commitment firmly in mind when they write." Nevertheless, she also points out that such an emphasis on identity "comes at the expense of many Aboriginal artists whose differences in background and creative expression create confusion over their rights to be considered Aboriginal."⁵⁰² And confusion was precisely what would trouble Mudrooroo's life, person and work as of 1996.

Ironically, whereas his own literary project increasingly points towards the fluidity and instability of the subject,⁵⁰³ the identity-politics-based criticism in his theoretical work—which, as his words regarding Sally Morgan show, also uneasily overlaps with gender and class—was later to catch up with his own person. Maureen Clark claims that "[i]n attacking Morgan this way, Mudrooroo engaged in a politics of contestation and difference that contradicted the lessons of his own literary project in its refusal to accept the colonising view of 'authentic' Aboriginal culture as something static, traditional and incapable of positive response to social change." Thus, she sees his

⁵⁰⁰ Mudrooroo 1990: 163 (my emphasis).

⁵⁰¹ Clark 2001: 48-9.

⁵⁰² Hughes 1998: 24.

⁵⁰³ Mudrooroo is notorious for renaming himself as an author—from Colin Johnson, to Mudrooroo Narogin, Mudrooroo Nyoongah, and finally Mudrooroo ('paperbark' in the Nyoongar language)—and for renaming characters and rewriting plots in his fiction, as in his *Wildcat* trilogy and *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* series.

attack as a possible cause for the later challenge to his claim to Indigenous identity.⁵⁰⁴ Likewise, Adam Shoemaker points out that the “[t]he 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*.”⁵⁰⁵ Shortly after the outbreak of public uproar about his identity, Mudrooroo published a rewritten version of his 1990 study of Aboriginal literature, now entitled *Milli Milli Wangka* (‘Paper Talk’ in the Nyoongah language), in which such haunting can be appreciated. His criticism of *My Place* now covers all of the prominent, final 9-page chapter, aptly entitled ‘Reconciling Our Place,’ and could be read as an attempt to lend more rigorous support to his views by placing Morgan’s autobiography within the wider socio-historic context of its publication: “In stressing the importance of *My Place* and Sally Morgan, what must not be ignored is the very matrix which enabled the book to be an all-time best-seller.” Mudrooroo’s conclusion is that *My Place* mirrors White readership’s concerns about its place in Australia, triggered off by the Bicentennial celebrations;⁵⁰⁶ it is “a text of Australian nationalism and identity, rather than a text of Indigenality, and this explains its great success.” Thus, he locates its importance in its being the prime example of “a literature of reconciliation” with White Australia.⁵⁰⁷

Despite his effort to put the analysis in a broader, distancing perspective, there is yet again an uneasy, perhaps uncanny link back to Mudrooroo as person and author. On page 192 one reads that “[i]f 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.”⁵⁰⁸ However, the latter is precisely the issue that had engaged with his person and work over the previous year. The troubling aspect of the latter comes all the more to the fore if one considers the following analysis in a well-known postcolonial study of Australian Literature published prior to the Mudrooroo Affair. In *Dark Side of the Dream*, Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra highlight the multiple similarities between Sally Morgan and Mudrooroo in the articulation and authentication of their Aboriginality:

⁵⁰⁴ Clark 2001: 53-4.

⁵⁰⁵ Shoemaker 2003: 12.

⁵⁰⁶ 1988 was the year of the Bicentennial, the mainstream celebration of the beginning of the British colonisation of Australia 200 years earlier, in other years celebrated on 26 January as Australia Day. It was also the year the author chose to change his name from Colin Johnson to Mudrooroo (‘Paperbark’) as his own contribution to the ‘Bicentennial project’ (Fischer 1993: I).

⁵⁰⁷ Mudrooroo 1997a: 195, 197, 198.

⁵⁰⁸ Mudrooroo 1997a: 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 Aboriginalist⁵⁰⁹ 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 [Sally 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.⁵¹⁰

In the light of this likeness, one may wonder about the subtle psychological mechanisms at work in Mudrooroo's criticism of Morgan's work and what exactly is at stake for him: is it a male prerogative to decide on the nature of Aboriginality? Perhaps caught out and haunted by his own words, it cannot be altogether coincidental that Mudrooroo shifts from using Aboriginality as a framing concept to a newly-coined "Indigenality" throughout *Milli Milli Wangka*,⁵¹¹ as if to elude the heavy biological and cultural determinism the former seems to encapsulate for himself as of 1996.

But the haunting detected here had, in fact, already started at an earlier stage. In 1992 Mudrooroo had professed public doubts about his Aboriginal lineage,⁵¹² which four years later were confirmed in the aforementioned, controversial article entitled 'Identity Crisis.'⁵¹³ Following the cue of a local Aboriginal spokesman, the journalist Victoria Laurie had contacted Mudrooroo's sister Betty Polglaze, who, puzzled by her long-lost, much younger brother's claims to Aboriginal kinship, had been engaged in amateur genealogical research. Enabled to ward off the Aboriginal stigma, she was "delighted"⁵¹⁴ to find out that the family's ancestry appeared Irish/Afro-American rather than

⁵⁰⁹ In Hodge & 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.

⁵¹⁰ Hodge & Mishra 1991: 97, 101.

⁵¹¹ Goldie 2001: 108.

⁵¹² Clark 2004.

⁵¹³ Laurie, Victoria 1996: 28-32.

⁵¹⁴ Frost 1997.

Aboriginal. As Mudrooroo had become an author with a highly politicised national profile and an academic heavyweight of Aboriginal studies, reactions were rife and frequently unfavourable in both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal circles, which led some to disqualify his work as ‘unauthentic’. The uncanny aspect of his case can be traced in the following academic assessment: “it politicised the elements of racial genealogy in Western Australia in an unprecedented way. The most famous, the most prolific and in many ways the most outspoken Aboriginal author over the past two decades was allegedly not Indigenous at all.”⁵¹⁵

Thus, the discussion of authenticity and the right to make claims for the Aboriginal communities unfolded along genetic-biological lines which uncannily reminded of old colonial, essentialist precepts. It caused Indigenous spokespeople to occupy positions uncannily compatible with conservative sectors in mainstream society who were interested in debunking any rebellious and vociferous forms of Indigeneity, exemplarily embodied in the figure and work of Mudrooroo. The resistance of an Aboriginal pressure group from Western Australia, Perth’s *Dumbartung Aboriginal Corporation*, to accept Mudrooroo’s Aboriginality is a telling example also cited in Victoria Laurie’s article. *Dumbartung* represents the Nyoongar mob to which Mudrooroo claims kinship. In their circular *Message Stick*, it had already been responsible for denouncing the US author Marlo Morgan for misappropriation of Aboriginality. This author, unrelated to Sally Morgan, had claimed Aboriginal spirituality having written the international New-Age bestseller *Mutant Message Down Under* (1992)⁵¹⁶ after a stay in Australia. Uncannily, Mudrooroo also slacks off a Morgan (i.e. Sally) and her novel, as “a new age phenomenon.”⁵¹⁷

When it came to Mudrooroo’s identity, *Dumbartung*, together with other representatives of the local Nyoongar community who had also become sensitive to the matter of what they perceived as a misappropriation of Aboriginal culture, declared that “someone [is] of Aboriginal descent who identifies as such and is recognised by their Aboriginal community to be so.” Would this definition enable Mudrooroo to inscribe his belonging in terms of nurture/cultural acquisition, spokesman Robert Eggington also emphasised that “Aboriginal blood is [an] essential” prerequisite in such a conception of

⁵¹⁵ Shoemaker 2003: 4.

⁵¹⁶ Eustace 2006: 68.

⁵¹⁷ Mudrooroo 1997a: 197.

Aboriginality,⁵¹⁸ bringing nature/biological authenticity back into the argument. Surprising as this essentialist touch may seem at first glance, *Dumbartung's* position harks back to the parameters of the legally-endorsed Commonwealth definition of Aboriginality, which straddles between nature and nurture. This definition is, as Marcia Langton notes, preferred by most Aborigines to earlier, entirely biological definitions from the assimilation period and considered “more social than racial”.⁵¹⁹ Indeed, the current, 1980s Federal and Constitutional working definition for Australian Indigeneity maintains a considerable distance from eugenics by stating that “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.”⁵²⁰ The importance of this three-part definition of Aboriginality based on descent, self-identification and community recognition lies in its having become the official benchmark for determining a citizen’s entitlement to different kinds of public benefits, aid and services. As such, it feeds into the debate on authenticity and the bouts of postcolonial racism that contemporary Australian has experienced over the last two decades.⁵²¹

The crux of the question—in Mudrooroo’s case and a number of less prominent ones—is the use of the concept of descent, which *The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia 2003* defines as an anthropological “method of classifying individuals in terms of their various kinship connections.” The *Britannica Concise Encyclopedia* (2006) describes descent similarly, as a “[s]ystem of acknowledged *social* parentage whereby a person may claim kinship ties with another,” noting that “[d]escent systems vary widely.” The latter source coincides with the former in defining kinship as the:

Socially recognized relationship 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.⁵²²

⁵¹⁸ Quoted in D’Cruz 2001: paragraph 20.

⁵¹⁹ Langton 1993: 29.

⁵²⁰ Quoted in Dodson 1994: 6.

⁵²¹ Gardiner-Garden 2000.

⁵²² See Works Cited: “descent”; “kinship” (my emphasis).

These descriptions inscribe descent and kinship flexibly as a biological and/or cultural option, with different societies adhering to varying inscriptions on this continuum.

One can understand the Australian Federal and Constitutional definition to bridge between the wording of previous racially-determinist legislation and the emancipatory international benchmark definition of Indigeneity developed by the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations in 1986. The latter is also the point of departure for the Aboriginal scholar and activist Michael Dodson in his ground-breaking reading of Aboriginal self-definition and self-determination in the 1994 Wentworth Lecture.⁵²³ Dodson argues that Aboriginality should be considered within the parameters offered by the UN:

Indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those which, having historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider 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.⁵²⁴

Notably, this wording does not specify the concepts of “historic continuity” and “ethnic identity” in cultural and/or genetic terms, but Dodson highlights that the UN study does reject a one-sided determinist definition of Indigeneity based either on biological ancestry or a romanticised, immobile cultural heritage. It refuses to sit:

⁵²³ 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. In 1959 Mr Wentworth argued for a comprehensive effort by the Australian Government to record the culture of Australian Indigenous peoples. As a result of Mr Wentworth’s political skills, the Institute was established by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies Act in 1964, with an interim Council set up in 1961. 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 Works Cited: “the Wentworth Lectures”).

⁵²⁴ Quoted in Dodson 1994: 5.

... *exclusively on either descent or cultural characteristics*. With respect to classifications based on blood percentages, it stated unambiguously that the scientific theory that there is an objective biological or genetic basis for race had been widely discredited ... [and] ... the study recognised that it was inappropriate to define Indigenous peoples entirely in terms of an imagined culture, free from the influence of non-Indigenous societies ... while cultural considerations are important, they could not be considered absolute.⁵²⁵

As imposed and received definitions of Indigeneity have traditionally been means of self-serving political control for colonial and modern states, the UN study takes an anti-orientalist stance. It concludes that “Indigenous populations must be recognised 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.” This leads Dodson to assert that “The [Indigenous Australian] community has the sovereign right to decide who belongs to it, without external interference,”⁵²⁶ and interprets that the imposition of Indigenous subjectivity and agency in the establishment of identity is the only way out of cultural and biological determinism:

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, our 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.⁵²⁷

While Dodson advocates an open, expansive definition of Aboriginality based on practice and performance rather than essentialist notions of genetic and cultural

⁵²⁵ Dodson 1994: 4-5 (my emphasis).

⁵²⁶ Dodson 1995: 5 (Dodson’s emphasis).

⁵²⁷ Dodson 1994: 10 (my emphasis).

belonging, he still retains the possibility of the strategic incorporation of “Aboriginal blood” as a defining factor.⁵²⁸ For better or for worse, his retention of a combination of nature and nurture as constitutive of Aboriginality is on a par with and may be understood to respond to contemporary Australian jurisprudence, which has slowly evolved from establishing Aboriginality as ‘degrees of blood’ (until the 1950s), ‘race’ (until the 1970s), to ‘descent’ (as of the 1980s). As John Gardiner-Garden notes in a Parliamentary study, race has been rejected as a scientific category, because “[f]or 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 points towards *social* constructions of identity, the current legal definition based on descent, self-identification and community acceptance:

... continue[s] to give meaning to ‘person of the Aboriginal race’ and a version of it was included in Justice Brennan’s Mabo (No. 2) judgement: “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.”⁵²⁹

This continuity of the concept of race in Australian legal dispositions may be responsible for the insistence of many Indigenous Australians upon a genetic link with Aboriginal ancestors for anyone to be accepted into their community. This is in line with “[t]he *practical* importance of descent [, which] comes from its use as a means for individuals to assert rights, duties, privileges, or status.”⁵³⁰ Therefore, if Aborigines choose to insist upon ‘biological authenticity’ in the definition of Australian Indigeneity, this uncanny evocation of essentialism may paradoxically be interpreted as a *strategic* use of identity in the service of an emancipatory, postcolonising politics of the body.⁵³¹ The latter, then,

⁵²⁸ Dodson 1994: 5, 10.

⁵²⁹ Gardiner-Garden 2000 (my emphasis).

⁵³⁰ *Britannica Concise Encyclopedia* 2006, my emphasis (See Works Cited: “descent”).

⁵³¹ Gelder and 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” (1998: xv). In a similar vein, the Aboriginal author Kim Scott holds that “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

would explain why Mudrooroo's identity ultimately falls outside the boundaries of Indigeneity as established by the Indigenous community itself. It would also explain Robert Eggington's insistence upon "the importance of the Dumbartung protocols to identify those who illegitimately use 'resources earmarked for our community'."⁵³²

Since in his theoretical work Mudrooroo has always professed a determinist imposition of a politics of the (male) Indigenous body, any notion of Aboriginality which includes biological lines of descent must fatally interrogate his status as an Indigenous person and his entitlement to speak up for the community, as his ostracisation in current Australian (and global) academia shows. Indeed, a substantial number of academics have withdrawn the qualification Aboriginal author from Mudrooroo, and opted for his inclusion into a broader category of Black Australian writing.⁵³³ This, however, is not an unproblematic manoeuvre. Regarding Mudrooroo's participation in the *Oceania* debate, Carolyn D'Cruz writes:

If there are members of the Aboriginal community who advocate a definition of Aboriginal identity in terms of blood, and if these members of the community denounce the Aboriginal identity of Mudrooroo in such terms, then where does this leave the status of Mudrooroo's own identification or connections with Aboriginal experiences, his identity as an Aboriginal writer, and his legitimacy in providing an Aboriginal speaking position ...? What happens to the status of those arguments that invest their own positions with recourse to Mudrooroo's authenticity? 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?⁵³⁴

As his de-authentication as an Aboriginal implies de-authorisation and disempowerment, is there an original, authentic 'truth' about Mudrooroo's descent, or is it forever muddled with uncertainties? And perhaps more importantly for an effective strategic politics of the

Aboriginal and so on and so on" (Buck 2001). Thus, the need to delimitate the concept of Aboriginal descent in genetic terms responds to a clear need to prevent fraudulent, self-interested uses of Indigenous identity.

⁵³² Quoted in Van Toorn 2007: 42.

⁵³³ See for instance the Austrian scholar Eleonore Wildburger, who respectfully takes her cue from Nyoongah Elders and follows the current practice in Australian universities of excluding Mudrooroo's comments on Indigenous matters from analysis (2003: 14, 99-100).

⁵³⁴ D'Cruz 2001: paragraph 21. See chapter 1, pp. 30-1 for the *Oceania* debate.

body, can Mudrooroo—and with him other cases of ‘inauthentic’ Aboriginality—be ‘redeemed’ on o/Other grounds?

A number of critics⁵³⁵ have pointed out that Mudrooroo’s silence on the subject has not been conducive to clarifying matters, and wry comments such as “I’m some sort of blackfella masquerading as a blackfella”⁵³⁶ draw the issue into the realm of falsity and impersonation, which can only add fuel to the debate concerning his identity. Then again, elusiveness is the author’s personal “trademark,”⁵³⁷ whether in his life or in his fiction. Whatever his biological antecedents, the particulars of Mudrooroo’s family circumstances and youth were marked by poverty, the untimely death of a black father whom he never knew, early abandonment to the institutional care of an orphanage, imprisonment and the racial labelling because of his skin colour. They were factors only too common among Aboriginal youngsters of his generation⁵³⁸, and must have contributed to him being bestowed⁵³⁹ as well as embracing an Indigenous Australian identity. As Mudrooroo holds himself, “I 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 bad faith.”⁵⁴⁰ Such uncanny passing the inverse way, which in the 1960s “was not exactly something that people were queuing up to do, ... was a passport to discrimination, prejudice and poverty, and many light-skinned Aboriginal people opted to assume a non-Aboriginal identity ... to escape the extreme difficulty of life as an Aboriginal.”⁵⁴¹

Thus, for his having chosen a difficult path in politically adverse times, both Natives and non-Natives have also spoken out in his defence. The Aboriginal writer Ruby Langford Ginibi moves from the slippery ground of the unifying element in their skin colour—after all, how does one define Blackness in the Australian context?—to his life as an Aborigine and firm commitment and solidarity with the Indigenous cause in order to uphold his right to an Aboriginal heritage:

⁵³⁵ See for instance Dixon, Little & Little 1996: 5-8 and Shoemaker 2003: 6

⁵³⁶ Quoted in Shoemaker 2003: 19, from a personal interview with the author.

⁵³⁷ Clark 2006: 135.

⁵³⁸ Goldie 2001: 106-7. See also Pybus 2003: 36-7.

⁵³⁹ This was notable done by the mainstream author Dame Mary Durack in her foreword to *Wildcat Screaming*, his first publication (see Pybus 2003: 37). Uncannily, as the political tables turn, the same sector of Australian society that once inscribed his Aboriginality now pretends to take it away from him.

⁵⁴⁰ Mudrooroo 1997b: 261.

⁵⁴¹ Foley 1997.

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.⁵⁴²

The Aboriginal writer-actor cum activist Gary Foley avoids the slippage between cultural acquisition and biological essentialism that Ginibi willy-nilly seems to invoke, and centres on a socially-inscribed Aboriginality based on "mutual aid and support and close ties grounded in familiarity." Thus, he writes that "[t]o me Mudrooroo has lived the life of an Aboriginal person, displayed Aboriginal values, and will always be regarded by me as an Aboriginal person."⁵⁴³

While never giving up an intense writing activity, Mudrooroo's presence in Australia was marked by an increasing, partly enforced, partly self-inflicted seclusion and marginalisation, in a return journey from the geographical, political and cultural centre to the fringe. In 1997 he gave up his academic job as the Head of the Department of Aboriginal Studies at Murdoch University in Perth, then moved to the relative isolation of the country, and later from Western Australia to Macleay Island just off the coast of Brisbane, Queensland.⁵⁴⁴ Finally, one year after the publication of his penultimate novel to date, *The Promised Land* (2000), he returned to Asia, where he had lived several years in the late 1960s and early 1970s. He finally settled in Kathmandu to continue his life-long studies of Buddhism.⁵⁴⁵ Not surprisingly, his recent move to Northern Queensland is far from his place of birth and envisaged in retirement. Shoemaker points out that the Mudrooroo affair, as well as others involving Aboriginal 'authenticity' in the mid 1990s, bears direct relation to "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 ... The disavowal and discreditation of Indigenous people has been strategically prominent."⁵⁴⁶

⁵⁴² Langford Ginibi 2003: 226 (my emphasis).

⁵⁴³ Foley 1997.

⁵⁴⁴ Shoemaker 2003: 4-5.

⁵⁴⁵ Clark 2004.

⁵⁴⁶ Shoemaker 2003: 14-5.

Interestingly, Mudrooroo's own research has thrown doubts on Betty Polglaze's findings. His sister established that their father was of mixed Irish-Afro-American descent, tracing him back to Northern Carolina, which would explain Mudrooroo's relatively dark complexion, and that their mother had Irish ancestry rather than the tribal link Mudrooroo claimed to the Kickett family of the local Nyoongah people.⁵⁴⁷ Nevertheless, Mudrooroo's antecedents remain plagued with uncomfortable voids and inaccuracies, in which the discussion has shifted from the matrilineal connection with Aboriginality to the intent to explain the author's skin colour through a presumed Afro-American father. Unfortunately, the latter rings of an uncanny grappling with racist discourse in the service of de-aboriginalisation. Notably, Polglaze's "belief that their father, Thomas C. P. Johnson, had been an 'American negro' was a single line in a locally produced pamphlet about the Western Australian town of Narrogin."⁵⁴⁸ Additionally, Mudrooroo's own genealogical pursuits in North Carolina did not fill out the Afro-American connection with any substance, all official records on his paternal grandfather, Thomas Johnson, apparently missing. While Cassandra Pybus gives a likely account of Thomas Johnson's roots by placing it in the wider context of Afro-American migration to Australia, specific details in his life remain tantalisingly scarce.⁵⁴⁹ Finally, Mudrooroo's own birth certificate was not signed by his mother, Elizabeth Barron, but by his sister Joyreen Johnson, which, according to genealogical counsel, may very well mean that Elizabeth Barron is not his biological mother.⁵⁵⁰

Therefore, Adam Shoemaker tentatively concludes that, at present, "Mudrooroo's ancestry cannot be 'proven' one way or the other,"⁵⁵¹ which would pre-empt any attempt to fix him in a reductive object position. Nevertheless, that Mudrooroo, who publicly vaunts a non-committal and distancing attitude in the matter,⁵⁵² is not immune to such attempts may be shown in his inexorable journey out of the Australian public sphere. In the latter sense, Maureen Clark places his leaving Australia for India and Nepal within the frustrations caused by "the ongoing controversy over his disputed claim to Aboriginality through a matrilineal link to the Bibbulmun people."⁵⁵³ And Terry Goldie therefore reaches the conclusion that, due to the irresolvable complexity of his trials and

⁵⁴⁷ Clark 2001: 51.

⁵⁴⁸ Shoemaker 2003: 6.

⁵⁴⁹ Pybus 2003: 35-6.

⁵⁵⁰ Shoemaker 2003: 6.

⁵⁵¹ Shoemaker 2003: 6.

⁵⁵² Adam Shoemaker cites one of his few public responses to the matter, "what happens, happens," which he places within the framework of his Buddhist beliefs (Shoemaker 2003: 5).

⁵⁵³ Clark 2004.

tribulations, “it should be accepted that Mudrooroo is not some self-serving impostor but someone who is caught in the midst of various problems of identification.”⁵⁵⁴ In analogy with Kobena Mercer’s and Ian McLean’s use of an apt phrase, this is a predicament that one may call Mudrooroo’s ‘burden of representation.’⁵⁵⁵

Once Aboriginalised to prevent empowerment, in Mudrooroo’s current plight one may discern an uncanny neo-colonialist re-incorporation of identity politics, whose racialist cultural determinism is employed to disempower the very minorities such an agenda was designed for. The implications of the latter are clear: whereas the racial binaries subjacent in essentialist versions of identity politics can lead to positions of political leverage, too strict and dogmatic an adherence to them may ultimately become counterproductive, as Mudrooroo’s case evidently shows. Indeed, it is questionable to read the author back in the text, although the genre of Aboriginal life-writing, of which *My Place* is an apt example, certainly gives rise to such critical manoeuvres. It is even worse to judge the quality of a text through the life of its author, as has happened with Mudrooroo’s work.⁵⁵⁶ Therefore, Mudrooroo’s corpus—oeuvre *and* person—deserves a more 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 authorising competing, often conflicting demands for collective self-representation.”⁵⁵⁷ Building from Bhabha’s premise, Annalisa Oboe believes it:

... 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

⁵⁵⁴ Goldie 2001: 112.

⁵⁵⁵ The art historian Ian McLean borrows this phrase from the British critic Kobena Mercer to describe the fact that Aboriginal artists are required to address issues of race on the stage of identity politics, which he considers ultimately counterproductive and reinstating the very racialist boundaries and colonialist repression such policies aim to undo (Ian McLean 1998); for Mudrooroo, not only the legitimacy of his work, but even of his very person is at issue, in an extreme case of ‘you write what you are.’ At the beginning of this chapter I also worded Mudrooroo’s predicament as ‘Black Man’s Burden’ (see p.147).

⁵⁵⁶ Adam Shoemaker notes: “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” (Shoemaker 2003: 4).

⁵⁵⁷ Bhabha 1999: 38.

him from succumbing to the pictures constructed for him by his readers and critics, but which seems also in tune with a view of Aboriginality as ‘unstable’ and shifting.⁵⁵⁸

Therefore, what is called for in the analysis of Mudrooroo’s work is a liberation from “the curse of authenticity”⁵⁵⁹ or black man’s burden of representation. His oeuvre demands a willingness to have it speak for itself, and attention to how, in its latest instances, it interweaves elements from the Fantastic, Gothic and Magic Realism to create uncanny, performative notions of identity that postcolonise static, reductive, essentialist visions of Aboriginality.

Now as Mudrooroo himself has it:

Australia is not Europe and was often seen as a harsh mistress, another woman, and thus coupled with the Native, the *Other*. The Master constructs stereotypes of the *Other* as Woman, as Native ... For the Native, the Woman, the Other to have equal power may mean a loss of possession, control and conformity. And the Master is ever the conservative, the Father in absolute control, for if he was to lose control, was to share his power, then this might in effect mean that he would lose control of himself.⁵⁶⁰

In the light of his coupling the Indigenous to the female, what should also be under scrutiny in such a rereading is Mudrooroo’s treatment of gender. The Sally Morgan episode has been interpreted as informed by a misogynist attitude which may have unjustly sharpened Mudrooroo’s criticism of *My Place*,² and thus compounded his own subsequent identity plight.⁵⁶¹ As well as in Mudrooroo’s theoretical work, Maureen Clark detects misogyny in his fiction, and expresses her dissatisfaction with the appearance of a *female* vampire as the symbol of Western colonialism in his latest novels:

⁵⁵⁸ Oboe 2003: xi. Mudrooroo himself wrote: “Am I to write a fictional life story as other’s 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 biographical section in www.mudrooroo.com, accessed 29 June 2009).

⁵⁵⁹ Shoemaker 2003: 21.

⁵⁶⁰ Mudrooroo 1995: 4-5.

⁵⁶¹ To what extent Mudrooroo’s criticism of *My Place* must have fed into his own identity plight is highlighted in his 2003 announcement that, while living abroad, he was working on an autobiography provisionally entitled *Not My Place?* (see Mudrooroo’s own webpage www.mudrooroo.com, accessed 29 June 2009).

Where he disappoints, however, is in 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. His female characters are sidelined, rarely fully developed and often portrayed as social property with the capacity to reason, behave and act self-consciously in a male-dominated world. For reasons known only to himself, he writes the place of women in the ever-changing Australian political environment as physically and morally weak – supportive at best and traitorous at worst. Testament to this trait are his last three novels, *The Undying* (1998), *Underground* (1999) and *The Promised Land* (2000). The books, which are written in the fantastical Gothic mode, are replete with metaphors of British imperialism as bloodthirsty and barbaric. *A misogynist to the end*, the author embodies his brutish metaphors in the figure of an excessively violent, female vampire. With little or no restraint Mudrooroo's social critique projects satirical allegiance to *an obsessive masculinist view* of the way things are. 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.*⁵⁶²

Is it possible, then that, while Mudrooroo is aware of the structural link between racism and patriarchy, in his fiction an effective recovery of Aboriginality is compounded by the perpetuation of traditional gender roles that locks the (native) female into reductive object positions? Or is the matter more complex, and the author shows his trickster skills, plays with race and gender conventions just at a time when his status as an Indigenous writer and critic is most controversial, and responds to the critical reception of his corpus by kindling the fictional fire? His refusal to answer publicly to the affair might be in line with the latter, and noncommittal comments such as "what happens, happens"⁵⁶³ heighten the elusiveness created by his public persona. Adam Shoemaker records Mudrooroo saying that "a fixed category is not my scene" in his literary project, but deplores that his "creative freedom, rebellion and wildness have been tamed by a

⁵⁶² Clark 2001: 52-3; 2004 (my emphasis).

⁵⁶³ Victoria Laurie 1996: 32.

controversy over authenticity *outside* the text.”⁵⁶⁴ And indeed, after *The Promised Land* (2000) Mudrooroo published little more from his Nepalese retirement; up until his recent move to Northern Queensland, his spiritual retreat abroad appeared to have turned into the embodiment of his last novel’s title, in replacement of the Aboriginal Australia that he so long cherished and that so long cherished him.⁵⁶⁵

So what answers Mudrooroo might give to the troubling questions raised by his fiction regarding race and gender, how are they *enacted* and *performed* rather than essentialised? In the light of the above, they inevitably lead back to his fiction alone. His most recent statement, the *Vampire* trilogy, consisting of *The Undying* (1998), *Underground* (1999), and *The Promised Land* (2000), develops out of two preceding novels, *Dr Wooreddy’s Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World* (1983) and *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* (1991), making for a series of five that spans and bridges different stages in Australian race relations at the crucial end of the 20th century. The ethnographic realism of *Dr Wooreddy* is still very much a product of and response to an assimilationist period, but at the height of his professional career, *Mudrooroo* substantially rewrites its pessimistic content and agenda into the more combative fantasy of *Master*,⁵⁶⁶ in tune with the improving conditions for the Aboriginal community at the onset of the Age of Mabo. Nevertheless, the *Vampire* trilogy is conceived in times of a serious conservative backlash which also feeds into Mudrooroo’s personal and professional crisis, so the optimistic lines laid down in *Master* are curbed into a sombre, Gothic mood. Not surprisingly, the author is at his most elusive in the latter tryptich, and 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 a refusal of the castrating Oedipal narrative and the adoption of a perspective that Annalisa Oboe defines as “productively impure.”⁵⁶⁷ That is, a postcolonising definition of Mudrooroo’s person and work in terms of performative promiscuity would enable to link his redemptive (re)configurations of fact and fiction to the feminine. Thus it should come as no surprise that Mudrooroo long claimed Aboriginal

⁵⁶⁴ Shoemaker 2003: 9.

⁵⁶⁵ In 2003 he published *The Survivalists*, a novel which received little, if no critical attention. Word has it that Mudrooroo lives “in retirement” in Northern Queensland nowadays, but I have found no written records to support this. One way or another, the author remains marginalised and silenced.

⁵⁶⁶ I will refer to *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* with *Master* in this chapter.

⁵⁶⁷ Oboe 2003: xvii.

descent through a *maternal* link with the Bibbulmun mob in Western Australia⁵⁶⁸ while his latest fiction centres on a *female* vampire as the locus of hybridisation.

4.2. Un/Mastering Colonial Discourse

While Mudrooroo's *Vampire* novels can be read as an independent trilogy through their focus on a female vampire as a metaphor for the White invasion of the Australian continent, they are also subsumed in the so-called *Master* quartet as a publisher's note on their respective covers states. Although this inclusion may be envisaged to cash in on *Master of the Ghost Dreaming*'s editorial success, it also points to the latter novel as the key text in a series of four spanning the crucial period of the Age of Mabo. Yet, in an elusive defiance of rigid boundaries and clear-cut definitions, the latter text itself reworks *Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World*, written by Mudrooroo eight years earlier.⁵⁶⁹ Thus, the existence of a thematically-linked quintet tracing the author's views on the state of Aboriginality over two decades suggests that the development of the vampire trilogy must be understood from the perspective of these first two novels together.

Doctor and *Master* fictionalise the vicissitudes of the few 'authentic' Aborigines⁵⁷⁰ who had managed to survive the British genocidal policies on Tasmania known as the *Black War* (1829-31) and had been confined to a mission reserve on Flinders Island, just off its coast, in the 1830s. Both novels, under different guises and following different plots, concentrate on the historical figure of George Augustus Robinson from the perspective of his Aboriginal aid, a Native shaman. Robinson was a social parvenu and self-styled White missionary, anthropologist and officially-appointed 'Conciliator and Protector of the Aboriginal People.' He was also prolific writer, whose "voluminous journals ... have been and continue to be used as important historical records,"⁵⁷¹ but historical research has also proven him a highly untrustworthy character who "invented

⁵⁶⁸ Clark 2006: 122.

⁵⁶⁹ Cf. Turcotte 2005: 114. Further references to this novel by *Doctor Wooreddy* only in this chapter.

⁵⁷⁰ 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. Thus, the fallacy of equating authenticity with full-bloodedness plays an important role in the implementation of genocidal policies; defining only 'full-bloods' as 'authentic Aborigines' functions as a useful preliminary step to the total disappearance of the 'race', only to turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy. Interestingly, the Tasmanian mainstream historian Henry Reynolds recently suggested he has a Tasmanian-Aboriginal forebear—and his case is probably not an exception (see his Postscript to *Nowhere People* [Penguin Australia 2005: 227-41]).

⁵⁷¹ Nolan 2003: 117.

himself” into a “heroicized and fictive persona.”⁵⁷² This colonial parvenu aimed to escape from the lower-class origins that could have locked him into poverty, and in the act, he repeatedly betrayed his Aboriginal wards’ trust so as to further his own career.⁵⁷³ Indeed, Robinson’s own account of the successes of his “conciliating” efforts towards the few surviving Natives are in stark contrast with “his disastrous attempts to establish a ‘Friendly Mission;’ it would effectively rid the small island of its Aboriginal inhabitants and so leave it free for White settlement.”⁵⁷⁴ In his attempts to recover an empowering Native past, Mudrooroo has developed a “career-long fascination”⁵⁷⁵ for this colonial career-maker who moves so ambiguously between fact and fiction in presumably objectively-written historical and anthropological tracts. Thus, he has engaged in the deconstruction and rewriting of this White trickster figure and the role his Aboriginal companion played in the latter’s exploits.

The relatively long period between the publication of both novels marks a significant development in Mudrooroo’s literary project, which reflects the introduction of new formal elements to further his cause of deconstructing a “eurocentric notion of Aboriginality” and “undermin[ing] European historiography.”⁵⁷⁶ Jodi Brown is supportive of Mudrooroo’s reconstruction of Aboriginal history in *Doctor Wooreddy*, 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:

Sometimes, however, 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 organisation thus re-confirming, in a sense, the dominant mode of European discourse.⁵⁷⁷

⁵⁷² Turcotte 2003: 132.

⁵⁷³ See for instance Vivienne Rae-Ellis’s *Black Robinson, Protector of Aborigines* (Melbourne: MUP 1988).

⁵⁷⁴ Turcotte 2003: 130.

⁵⁷⁵ Clarke 2001: 57.

⁵⁷⁶ Turcotte 2003: 129.

⁵⁷⁷ Brown 1993: 74.

Although subversion is served in an empowering reversal of narrative point of view—it is (Aboriginal) Wooreddy’s and not (White) Robinson’s—and the resulting depiction of the Protector of the Aborigines verges on the ridiculous, Native defeat permeates the novel from the beginning to the end, and its linearity and inevitable closure operate as a narrative trap. It is encapsulated in the title, which refers to the destruction of the Aboriginal universe. It is meted out in the vision of Aboriginal apocalypse that Robinson’s later aid and companion, Wooreddy, has on the first pages. It informs all later attempts of “the good Doctor”⁵⁷⁸ to understand as much of White culture and to record mentally as much of Aboriginal culture as possible, becoming a “travelling encyclopedia”⁵⁷⁹ or dark double of the White anthropologist. Finally, it is shown in the lonely death of the shaman, who, without biological and spiritual offspring, fails to preserve Aboriginal culture. Despite the innovative treatment, which “de-Gothicises Aboriginality ... first by reversing and then by subverting the ... binary oppositions” of the Aboriginal as bloodthirsty and the White invaders as ghosts,⁵⁸⁰ the novel’s conclusion is bleak and lacking hope, echoing the resignation encapsulated in Wooreddy’s oft-repeated comment, “It is the times.”⁵⁸¹

This would prove Gerry Turcotte right, who holds that Gothic discourse would simultaneously enable the settler’s expression and silence the settled-upon, so that native writers in general avoid the use of the genre.⁵⁸² However, *Mudrooroo* is able to use its postcolonising potential to highlight the uncanny aspects of decolonisation and recasts *Wooreddy* in an uncanny rewrite—*Master of the Ghost Dreaming*—introducing significant innovations in content and form. Names change to inscribe new roles and self-definitions: Robinson becomes Fada, an Aboriginal phonetic transcription of Father which mocks the significance of his mission; Wooreddy becomes Jangamuttuk, the problem-solving shaman who is no longer a failed, doomed copy of the White ‘anthropologist’ but instead enacts Homi Bhabha’s colonial mimicry⁵⁸³ to adapt songlines to the new times; and Trugernanna, Wooreddy’s untrustworthy companion, becomes the steadfast Ludjee, who actively engages in the liberating Ghost Dreaming. The plot, which still draws on similar settings and situations, is no longer marked by resignation, stasis and death, but re-

⁵⁷⁸ Mudrooroo 1983: 40.

⁵⁷⁹ Tapping 1990: 57.

⁵⁸⁰ Van Toorn 1992-3: 94-5.

⁵⁸¹ Mudrooroo 1983: 9. Incidentally, this rather meek statement is uncannily echoed in Mudrooroo’s public comment on his identity plight: “What happens, happens” (Shoemaker 2003: 5).

⁵⁸² Turcotte 2005: 105.

⁵⁸³ Bhabha 1994: 86. See also chapter 2, pp. 91-3.

inscribed 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.”⁵⁸⁴

This traditional postscript following the conventions of the 19th-century adventure novel is, more than a confirmation of, an ironic wink to European realist narrative. It agrees with the agenda of stylistic blurring and hybridising Mudrooroo applies to the text as a whole which he coins *Maban Reality*, and which I analyse as an instance of Postcolonising Dreaming Narrative. 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 ...⁵⁸⁵

One can easily see how this narrative approach counters Jodi Brown’s criticism of *Dr Wooreddy*. Not surprisingly, John Barnes celebrates the genre of *Maban Reality* as “an exciting new development in Australian fiction, which is likely to have significant impact upon the next generation of Aboriginal writers.”⁵⁸⁶ Arguably, Mudrooroo made a significant step towards the incorporation of the Aboriginal Sacred into literature that younger Indigenous authors such as Kim Scott and Alexis Wright would further develop.

In Mudrooroo’s view, *Maban Reality* is akin to Magic Realism: it “might be characterised 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 as existent and as real as that constructed by European thought.”⁵⁸⁷ This definition aims to record the ongoing physical and spiritual connection of the Aborigines with the land from oral into written narrative; it is both a tangible and textual-imaginative territory which Mudrooroo claims has never been ceded in the process colonisation. In a

⁵⁸⁴ Mudrooroo 1991: 148.

⁵⁸⁵ Mudrooroo 1997a: 104. One should note the reference to Freud in his explanation.

⁵⁸⁶ Barnes 1999: 3.

⁵⁸⁷ Mudrooroo 1997a: 97-8.

discussion of Mudrooroo's literary project, Clare Archer–Lean writes, “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*.”⁵⁸⁸ Thus, Maban Reality also takes issue with the all-pervading monolithic colonial world construct based on the natural sciences:

Natural scientific reality as the only allowable ideology shaping reality had to be used not only by colonial authorities to write about the natives, but later on by those natives who had been silenced and who then, after eventually becoming acclimatised to natural scientific realities, began to answer the coloniser ... those who assumed voices to speak for the native and to set a political agenda had to appropriate the dominant language and with it the dominant reality: natural scientific reality.⁵⁸⁹

Its imposition was needed to control a potentially uncanny Other: “[t]he *beast* must become *tamed*, static and able to be petted, examined and made *known*. It cannot be *strange*, it must be scientifically acceptable”⁵⁹⁰ and its imposition also meant the suppression of the universe of magic as embodied in the shaman/maban. To deconstruct this Aboriginalist coupe of Western knowledge, Mudrooroo configures Maban Reality beyond a recovered superstition or literary genre; it is a cultural-political project to overcome Native dispossession in the widest sense of the word, drawing on the world of the Aboriginal Dreaming:

When sitting with my people and talking about our writing, there are two strands which emerge in our yarns, one is to tell history as it is, not relying on those documents of the past which after all are the records of the colonisers ... and the other is the magic of our Dreaming, of our own genres and ways of speaking. Language after all is a magic construct and to try and gain truth from it is a dubious undertaking, especially now when the European way is the best and too often they create and seek to impose hard realities existing on nothing but the words and marks of language, and so if we believe in

⁵⁸⁸ Archer-Lean 2003: 221.

⁵⁸⁹ Mudrooroo 1997a: 91.

⁵⁹⁰ Mudrooroo 1997a: 90 (my emphasis).

ourselves we must continue to struggle to define our reality and to live it in this land of ours which for thousands of years we sang into culture and spread a tapestry of living language over its living reality. Having come from the bush, having listened to those songs defining what is the bush, I feel the urge to return and from this, the shadows, survey those angular geometries called cities, another magic formed from another reality. How does one become reconciled to this reality when there is another reality calling me.⁵⁹¹

Significantly, the last sentence is not a question but a statement. Mudrooroo particularly calls on the adaptability of the novel “to deconstruct the awful invader history of Australia and Indigenalise 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 recognise as her own.”⁵⁹²

But to the European mind reconciliation of two such different worlds is problematic as they are (at least to some extent) incommensurable, and may call into being the uncanny when they interact, releasing the ‘beast’ that Western scientific thought for so long has aimed to control:

An Indigenous writer simply presents a world which is different from what natural scientific reality once presented as the only reality. I should say this world, this reality, may be *familiar as well as strange* and it allows for the opening of 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’*.⁵⁹³

Clare Archer-Lean points out that Maban Reality’s “most useful analytical entry point into Mudrooroo’s creation of new worlds is the move beyond the realm of pure ‘fantasy’ into a space formed by the interplay between different motifs ... This means there are no clearly locatable binaries here—scientific and rational ‘reality’, imagined and created ‘fantasy’.”⁵⁹⁴ So in some ways the novel is the literary hybrid that, theoretically, would constitute an apt tool to bridge the differences inherent in multiculturalism but, in praxis,

⁵⁹¹ Mudrooroo 1997a: 89.

⁵⁹² Mudrooroo 1997a: 103.

⁵⁹³ Mudrooroo 1997a: 98 (my emphasis).

⁵⁹⁴ Archer-Lean 2003: 204.

might turn into the uncanny ghost that, from cultural margins, haunts as anxiety our postmodern condition of indefiniteness, unfixity and unsettledness.

Significantly, Mudrooroo claims that postmodernism, understood as the logic continuation of 19th and early 20th century modernism, is just another way of Western containment of the Other, which makes cultures and identities unproblematic and expendable by commodification.⁵⁹⁵ He therefore proposes another definition that relocates postmodernism as an unsettling psychological condition:

[P]ostmodernism is not a monolithic structure ... [I]t is quite *schizophrenic* ... so that myriad realities may exist within it ... The various multiculturalisms of different nations, as well as the withdrawal of nations from multiculturalism, are examples of this plurality which deconstructs the term 'postmodernism' ... One of these is Maban Reality, an Australian reality which comes from the land and from the oldest, continuous cultures in the world. It has endured long and survived the holocaust of natural scientific reality.⁵⁹⁶

Thus, the tensions in multiculturalism may be explained out of the uncanny f(r)ictions arising when (very) different cultural realities come into contact in their struggle for articulation within the same nation space. It should come as no surprise that Mudrooroo formulated these ideas just one year after the conservative landslide victory in Australia, which once again led to assimilationist politics.

Taking the uneasy meeting of cultures back to the object of this section, *Master of the Ghost Dreaming*'s most significant feature is its action on a level of consciousness which is difficult to grasp for Westerners; Aboriginal characters are liberated from the constraints of the Christian mission reserve and move around freely with their totemic Dreaming companions, successfully battling with monstrous shape-changing insects and beings that represent colonialism. In a way, the uncanny obtains for the Western reader because the genre of the quest novel is defamiliarised: familiar in shape yet so strange in content. Whereas the Native world is "de-Gothicised", to use Penny van Toorn's term, the ghostly non-Native world is ironically cast in Gothic shapes and embodies 'the beast that must become tamed' by the Natives. The uncanny obtains for the Aboriginal characters as their Dreamtime is unsettled by the presence of the colonialist beast/'ghost' in a particular

⁵⁹⁵ Mudrooroo 1997a: 104.

⁵⁹⁶ Mudrooroo 1997: 105 (my emphasis).

version of Postcolonising Dreaming Narrative that comes to its full, Gothic thrust in the vampire trilogy. Nevertheless, the Natives aim to face up to their monsters, making for an empowering vision defying Wooreddy's. Wooreddy witnessed the White occupation of his native Bruny Island and interpreted the arrival of British boats and their crews as floating islands which carried ghost-like pale souls. These had been captured by Ria Warrawah, the evil presence associated with the surrounding sea which is taboo for Native men but Native women's realm. Their landing is understood by the young boy as the unalterable "ending of the world,"⁵⁹⁷ a metaphor which was to become literal truth for the Tasmanian Aborigines.

However, the first pages of *Master* throw the reader head over heels into an Aboriginal ceremony led by the already elderly and experienced Jangamuttuk, who enacts a process of reverse colonisation. In a perfect example of Homi Bhabha's notion of colonial mimicry,⁵⁹⁸ the ceremony mixes traditional ritual of music and dance with adapted hairdo, body paintings representing European dress (pockets, lapels, etc.) and fragments of convict ballads. Thus, Jangamuttuk's people try to create the adequate transcendental conditions to get to the core of Western power and master it. Whereas the Europeans have colonised the physical world, the Aborigines aim to be in control of the spiritual. Tellingly, the maban is convinced of his success in this quest since it is a "ceremony which had been dreamt in response to the pleas of his people. He would establish contact. He would enable them to evade the demons and sickness which were weakening and destroying them, and then when they were strong"⁵⁹⁹

Not without reason Jangamuttuk is the Master of the Ghost Dreaming, a powerful shaman in control of his environment and a spiritual guide to his people:

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

⁵⁹⁷ Mudrooroo 1983: 3-4.

⁵⁹⁸ Bhabha 1994: 86. See also chapter 2, pp. 91-3.

⁵⁹⁹ Mudrooroo 1991: 4.

done. The need for the inclusion of these elements into a ceremony with a far different purpose than mere art.⁶⁰⁰

The shaman's agenda, as if in answer to Mudrooroo's ideas on the literary, places the application of 'realism' within the strand of harmful assimilationist policies: one should avoid 'aping' Western culture and go beyond mimicry and assimilation in order to safeguard survival. 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."⁶⁰¹ Thus, the performative elements of the ritual are, in fact, transgressive and transformative qualities that highlight a conception of Aboriginality as adaptable to specific needs, and able to respond to new circumstances rather than "doomed to extinction."⁶⁰²

This performative quality is in stark contrast with Fada's pseudo-anthropological analyses. They interpret the ritual of Aboriginal repossession which he spies upon "with his all-seeing eye" as a "realist copy"—a kind of "mass of the Popish Church of Rome." Nothing is further from the truth and the incommensurability of both worlds is highlighted, which is a constant element in the novel. Facing up to its familiar strangeness, Fada is able to pinpoint the subversive potential of the ritual in calling it Popish, a qualification reminiscent of the religious conflict that permeated early-modern British history. However, the text ironically reverses the notion of danger when "fascinated, he stayed hidden in the darkness behind the illumination of the fires. His romantic nature came to the fore. He felt like some elfin spirit watching the mysterious ways of the humans." The humans are obviously not the Europeans but the Aborigines, whereas the unnatural and frightening in this environment is embodied by the missionary. To underscore this, the text immediately follows up with a change of perspective: "Jangamuttuk was afraid in the realm of the ghosts," unaware that he is being watched by one.⁶⁰³

Thus, an important issue that Fada fails to pick up on is the intimate link between form and content in the Aboriginal Dreaming: the ritual is much more than a warped copy of church ceremonial whose colonial "mimicry" is there to be merely enjoyed by the

⁶⁰⁰ Mudrooroo 1991: 3.

⁶⁰¹ Rask Knudsen 2003: 174.

⁶⁰² Mudrooroo 1997a: 92.

⁶⁰³ Mudrooroo 1991: 12.

Europeans.⁶⁰⁴ Content in the Aboriginal 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 criticism of a strand of postmodern thinking that empties identities out to commodifiable and expendable forms: "Europeans are simulacra without fixity of purpose and even less fixity of identity."⁶⁰⁵ And it is determination of purpose and rootedness in their culture that the Aborigines show in the novel as opposed to the missionary family: Fada and his wife, Mada, leave the island in a mock farewell procession, in the knowledge of having failed. After commenting on the tremendous amount of deaths, the missionary proclaims, "I shall return to take you away from this dreadful place." However, the Aboriginal deaths have been caused by common European illnesses, malnutrition, starvation and general grief at the Native displacement from former lands. Thus, a British sailor comments sarcastically, "My third voyage on this run. First time, there must've been over a hundred of the poor blighters. On the second, we found fifty starving wretches. Now on the third there's maybe twenty or twenty-five left. What does he do, *eat 'em?*"⁶⁰⁶ This is yet another inversion of roles, a textual subversion that Gothicises the benevolent Christian missionary into the bloodthirsty European monster, and foreshadows later fictional developments in the author's vampire trilogy.

The often ritualistic inversions of roles that run through the text are closely linked to what Jodi Brown already pinpointed in its precursor as the "carnavalesque."⁶⁰⁷ Mudrooroo draws on the subversive potential that Mikhael Bakhtin discerns in the carnival festivity: "carnival, like the novel, is a *means for displaying otherness*; carnival makes familiar relations strange."⁶⁰⁸ Just as the end of the festivity empties form from content, inaugurating the return to normality—the power relations questioned are never permanently upturned—in *Dr Wooreddy* the carnivalesque revolt of the narrative is eventually contained by the extinction of the Natives; although giving glimpses of another possible reality, it fails to accomplish its subversive potential. Its sequel cum rewrite, however, employs a similar "parodic mimicry" that serves to unsettle and rewrite colonial accounts of history. This is accompanied by a transformation of genre as well:

⁶⁰⁴ Mudrooroo 1991: 10.

⁶⁰⁵ Mudrooroo 1997a: 104.

⁶⁰⁶ Mudrooroo 1991: 135 (my emphasis).

⁶⁰⁷ Brown 1993: 77.

⁶⁰⁸ Holquist 1994: 90.

Where *Doctor Wooreddy* had signalled a quiescent defeat before the European onslaught, *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* enacts a specific, hallucinogenic and unqualified conquering of the mission ... As well as a type of wish-fulfilment narrative, what the ending of [the novel] puts in place is a jarring, non-realist fusion of narrative types ... Generic categories are made uncanny: familiar and yet unfamiliar, simultaneously.⁶⁰⁹

In *Dr Wooreddy*, “[i]t’s the times” that conduce to the inevitably dismal finale for the natives; however, in *Master* these very times have changed for the better, precisely because Postcolonising Dreaming Narrative has actively and decisively engaged with a realist narrative structure, unsettling rigid notions of race, class and gender. The exorcism, a performative mimicry of sorts carried out on the first pages, propels the reader into a Gothic, hallucinogenic world in which the maban has to find remedy for the ills of his people.

The spiritual world that Jangamuttuk enters through this new ritual centres on five different characters. These are, on the one hand, his female companion Ludjee; the Black African Wadawaka, who has been admitted to the tribe after ritual initiation; and Jangamuttuk himself, together with their totemic animals Manta Ray, Leopard and Goana. On the other hand there is Fada, represented by a monstrous hornet; and his wife, Mada, who has the elusive ability to shape-shift into different insects and birds. Against expectations, it is not Fada who represents the real danger in this Ghost Dreaming, and Jangamuttuk describes him as his “tame spirit.”⁶¹⁰ This role is reserved for Mada, whose colonial dis-ease emulates the Natives’ sickened condition: “Illness had begun when she had allowed herself to be taken to this colony ... on what he called his mission of conciliation.” Her sickness and suffering are intimately related to the displacement the colonial project entails:

She sighed alone in exile and with the pain eating away at her. She needed her medicine. Over the years the memories of London dimmed. Now it was a fairyland free from suffering. How she hated that pig of a husband snorting beside her. Him and his career ... Him and his altruism. His stupid ideas about serving humanity and taking the message of Christian caring and goodwill to

⁶⁰⁹ Turcotte 2003, 139-141.

⁶¹⁰ Mudrooroo 1991: 17.

benighted savages like the ones dying all around her. Why, he loved those sable friends of his more than he loved his own wife.

Trapped by the roles of wifehood and motherhood bestowed upon her, now she entirely depends on drugs:

She had had to be the man to her child while he was off in the wilderness up to God alone knows. Now, after all that time of strength, her body had broken down ... In fact it felt as though it was the battlefield between constantly warring groups of organs ... What could she do but seek a truce in the warfare ... One medicine above all she valued as a pacifier, laudanum.⁶¹¹

Jangamuttuk is deceived by the powers of Western medicine when in ritual trance he enters a Gothic re-incarnation of the mission setting, dominated by a lonely castle:

Mist and the smell of decay. In the distance, but what was distance, close, rose a hill fantastically shaped by the weather of this forbidding country. Such was his human reasoning, but then his special ghost knowledge entered his mind. It was a castle, a dwelling of the higher ghosts who would hold the medicine that would bring health to his people. He had to get inside.⁶¹²

There he finds the peacefully-asleep ghost-like Mada, who he wrongly believes to possess the medicine his people need to recover from the ills of colonisation, therefore grabbing the “source of her good health,”⁶¹³ her supply of laudanum. Once back in the material world, he distributes it to his people, which is uncannily misinterpreted by Fada as a ceremony of Christian Communion. But soon the shaman realizes his mistake and decides to return with his companions Ludjee and Wadawaka to situate solutions for the Aboriginal plight in healing the ‘female ghost,’ mapping race across gender conflict.

⁶¹¹ Mudrooroo 1991: 6-7.

⁶¹² Mudrooroo 1991: 12.

⁶¹³ Mudrooroo 1991: 15.

It is useful to stand still at the image projected of Mada/Mother within her family unit. First of all, her very name is situated in the symbolic, presumably representative of the material and spiritual progress European colonisation was supposed to bring; nevertheless, her qualities are far removed from the purity of mind and body exemplified in the Biblical Mother Mary. Moreover, her husband, Fada/Father, claims to be on a civilising, Christianising mission, but motivated by selfish gain and complacency, he is generally depicted as self-serving colonial career-maker and victim of the temptations of the flesh. Lastly, their son/Sonny never assumes the role of (spiritual) leader of the flock but leaves control in the hands of Wadawaka; it is this black African adopted into the mission mob who emulates Jesus as the uncanny saviour of a dispersed group of Aborigines. In this configuration, Sonny cannot be conceived as the Natives' key to salvation. He ends up solitary and drunk on the island after the mission compound has been destroyed by the shaman's magic connection to the essence of Aboriginal religion, the earth. Indeed, in flattening the premises with a boulder, "Island had reclaimed the structure to examine it at his leisure."⁶¹⁴

Thus, a warped, re-enactment of the Holy Family appears, re-interpreted by Mudrooroo to register the failure of the colonial project. If its male parts are inscribed as weak and corrupted, how about its female counterpart? Mada's configuration in the realm of the Dreaming has little in common with the moral purity of the Holy Mary:

A ghost female lay 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 knew 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 completely satisfaction, her

⁶¹⁴ Mudrooroo 1991: 146.

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.⁶¹⁵

In this sequence, we receive two entirely different, juxtaposed images from the realm of legend and myth: Mada changes from a courtly Sleeping Beauty to a ravenous sexually-deprived female vampire, a notion driven home by such words as “blood”, “hunger”, “claws” and “throat”. Here, the Aboriginal search for solutions acquires a disturbing quality of male empowerment; it uncannily mixes notions of sexual attraction, voyeurism, fear and loathing of the female Other, and develops into actual seduction as Jangamuttuk ‘steals her prize,’ the laudanum. This is all the more unsettling because the scene is located at the very beginning of the novel, determining the remaining action through Jangamuttuk’s Dream contact with Mada. In her discussion of this encounter in *Master*, Lyn McCredde[n] rightly says that:

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...⁶¹⁶

Whereas the latter comment rings true for the whole of the *Master* series, in which Mada’s vampiric qualities reach their full development in Amelia Fraser, one should also point out the ways in which Mudrooroo empowers colonial women in *Master of the Ghost Dreaming*. Ludjee is in many senses Mada’s positive counterpart. She is ‘pure’ in not giving in to Fada’s sexual desire—“She had never let him get even close to what she kept between her legs.”⁶¹⁷ But Ludjee’s image also empowers Aboriginality sexually, forcing the sexually-aroused Fada to profess falsely, “Such restraints were what made the British

⁶¹⁵ Mudrooroo 1991: 15.

⁶¹⁶ McCredde[n] 1993: 30.

⁶¹⁷ Mudrooroo 1991: 49.

Empire great. Such restraints were derived from the teaching of his religion.”⁶¹⁸ He cannot avoid depicting her in sketches in which sexual desire masquerades as anthropological interest.⁶¹⁹ His depiction of her as a Black Venus of Botticelli⁶²⁰ is in stark contrast with the repulsion he feels for 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 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.⁶²¹

This scene bears, in fact, an uncanny link to Jangamuttuk’s encounter with Mada in the world of the Ghosts. Immediately after her appearance from the sea, Ludjee offers seafood to her husband but Fada exclaims, “Shellfish, shellfish, I thought that there was none available on these rocks.”⁶²² The sexual innuendo implicit in his remark is highlighted earlier: when in sexual arousal he proposes going to the beach to do some “shellfish hunting,” she answered dismissively, “Ain’t no shellfish there, Fada.”⁶²³ Voyeurism—the male gaze—is present in both scenes, but whereas in the first it is linked to sexual conquest, in the second sexual attraction fails to produce seduction. In the latter, it is Jangamuttuk who receives the reward (‘prize’) again, whereas Ludjee, in all her luring black beauty, remains unattainable for the White missionary.

But Ludjee’s power goes beyond the sexual: her ancestral spiritual connection to the sea, symbolized through her totemic companion Manta Ray, is liberating and necessary to win the postcolonising battle in the Dreaming. Jangamuttuk’s growing awareness of this marks the point where, narratively speaking, Maban Reality transforms and empowers

⁶¹⁸ Mudrooroo 1991: 49.

⁶¹⁹ Significantly, his drawing skills are taken over by the female vampire, Amelia, in later novels.

⁶²⁰ The *Fine Arts Dictionary* describes this iconic Italian Renaissance painting as follows: “A painting by Sandro Botticelli. It depicts the birth of the goddess Venus, also known as Aphrodite, from the foam of the sea. The painting is often referred to humorously as ‘Venus on the half-shell’” (See Works Cited: “The Birth of Venus”). The fact that Botticelli painted Venus, the Classical goddess of love, naked, breaks with the medieval Christian tradition of hiding nudity and is an important Humanist innovation. The painting (from c.1482) is often taken as a metaphor for the rebirth of Western civilisation after the Middle Ages. Mudrooroo ironically plays on these notions to debunk Robinson’s false missionary and civilising zeal. Thus, the references to shellfish in the text are by no means gratuitous; they hark back to the contained eroticism of Venus’s display on a shell in Botticelli’s painting and are, therefore, full of sexual innuendo.

⁶²¹ Mudrooroo 1991: 63.

⁶²² Mudrooroo 1991, 64.

⁶²³ Mudrooroo 1991: 50.

black femininity, inscribing the text more fully as an instance of Postcolonising Dreaming Narrative. The following scene is strategically placed after Jangamuttuk's origin stories on Male and Female Law, transmitted during the initiation rites of two young Aborigines:

She stood there unconscious of the ghost just a few yards away. She waited. The old ways began flowing through her ... 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 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.⁶²⁴

Once again, Mudrooroo presents a reworking of tradition as the way out of compromising new circumstances, rather than discarding it in favour of an uncritical assimilation of the coloniser's ways. Mudrooroo goes to some extent in rewriting the important but dubious role ascribed to the historical Ludjee—Trugernanna in official mainstream records on the Tasmanian natives.⁶²⁵ However, he primes the actions of her

⁶²⁴ Mudrooroo 1991: 59-60 (my emphasis).

⁶²⁵ Turcotte 2003: 136-7. Variant spellings of Trugernanna's name occur in mainstream records and academic papers, such as Trugernanner, Truganini, Trukanini, Truganinni, Trucanini, and Trucaninny. Her nickname Lalla Rooke, after an Oriental princess, is also used by George Augustus Robinson in *The Promised Land* (Mudrooroo 2000: 113). Regarding the latter 'aristocratic touch', *The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture* 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

real-life companion Wooreddy—Jangamuttuk in his fiction—and uses a male prerogative of power to forge a liberating concept of pan-Aboriginality. Besides writing up Wooreddy/Jangamuttuk’s participation, “who had orchestrated things so that Fada would need to retreat to the capital,”⁶²⁶ the character he introduces to achieve the latter is a powerful African male. Wadawaka becomes the third traveller necessary to complete the Aboriginal voyage into spiritual and material recovery.⁶²⁷

Indeed, Wadawaka, black but not an Aborigine, effectively represents a blurring of the lines of race. Penal transport in the 19th century did not only include white British citizens, but also black Africans who had committed offences at different slave stations in the Empire.⁶²⁸ And thus, due to his rebellious behaviour, Wadawaka is transported from Benin to the penal colony. Once there he is adopted by Jangamuttuk’s mob, to form part of a hybrid collection of lost natives 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.”⁶²⁹ In this respect, Fada entertains revelatory thoughts on Wadawaka’s ritual scars after he has used the latter as the scapegoat for his failed pursuit of Ludjee. Ludjee and Wadawaka’s shared blackness fuel Fada’s fear of rebellion, but this is immediately undone by a faulty anthropological analysis which paradoxically underlines how an inclusive definition of Aboriginality as blackness can be constitutive of political 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

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 (Kleinert and Neale 2000: 722)

⁶²⁶ Mudrooroo 1991: 129.

⁶²⁷ Perhaps tellingly for the author’s conflictive treatment of gender, in subsequent novels Wadawaka engages in a troubling relationship with the female vampire, Amelia.

⁶²⁸ For an elaborate discussion of the African diaspora in Australia, refer to Cassandra Pybus 2003.

⁶²⁹ Rask-Knudsen 2003: 168.

believe that there existed a connection between this remote colony and Africa. 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.”⁶³⁰

Uncannily, Fada’s “most unlikely” hypothesis bears the seed of a larger truth; the text claims Aboriginality through a cultural kinship model rather than through the bio-genetic narrative of the natural sciences. Thus, it locates Indigenous strength and power to adapt and withstand in a conceptual ‘dark’ space across genetic and geographical borders. Similarly, “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.”⁶³¹

Significantly, Wadawaka is a hybrid in many senses: not only is he adopted into Aboriginal culture, but his birth on the Middle Passage is reflected in his name, meaning “Born on the Waters.”⁶³² As an eternal traveller or water-walker (‘Wadawaka’), 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.”⁶³³ Yet, he is also an uncanny religious double, a black saviour who like Jesus Christ is able ‘to walk on water’ as the phonetics of his name and sailing skills indicate. Thus, the knowledge he acquires in cross-cultural contact with the Europeans enables the Natives to bridge the taboo area between Male and Female Aboriginal Law, which assigns the earth to men and the sea to women. An expert seaman, it is Wadawaka who teaches the Aborigines to rig and sail the schooner that will take them to freedom. Thus, an empowering, solidary vision of Aboriginality is wrought that is able to adapt to new circumstances in productive, liberating ways.

Thus supplied with knowledge, the three travellers are able to enter the Ghost Dreaming as a powerfully-united Aboriginal double of the Holy Family. There, they successfully confront the terrors of a colonialist Hell, represented by a monstrously-shaped Fada and an utterly dangerous shape-changing Mada. The Aboriginal intervention

⁶³⁰ Mudrooroo 1991: 76-7.

⁶³¹ Archer-Lean 2003: 214.

⁶³² Mudrooroo 1991: 77.

⁶³³ Mudrooroo 1991: 85.

in the terrain of the Dreaming is productive both ways: it achieves Mada's healing, a period of conciliation with her husband, and their leave from the island mission:

For the first time in years Mada was happy and even felt comfortable in Fada's company. Soon, she would be back in London. She just knew she would. The very thought made her giggle. No more island, no more colony, no more down under ... He too felt freed from a burden which had bowed him down long enough. The stagnation of island life was not for him. He had left his mark on the island and that was more than enough.⁶³⁴

Thus, colonial displacement is solved in a retreat to origins. Tellingly, the island is foregrounded as a male persona in the last chapter and reflects on the fleeting human presence on "his skin". The island presses the mission compound into the earth with a giant boulder propelled from the Aboriginal spiritual high point of the island, thus erasing the colonialist/Fada's presence. Thus satisfied, it "settled back to a peace only marred by a single slumbering boy [Sonny]. The dismal period was over."⁶³⁵ Meanwhile the natives have undertaken their voyage to 'the promised land,' which aligns with the opportunities of territorial repossession laid down in the new Native Title legislation, soon to be implemented after the publication of *Master*.

Wadawaka acts as the expert seafarer whose hybrid knowledge guides the dispossessed Aborigines on this journey to freedom. However, he may also remind us of the author as the skilful navigator through this fiction, who in hindsight has been interpreted by some critics to have had a markedly personal interest in 'plotting' a course of hybrid, pan-Aboriginal empowerment. However, as the first uncertainties about Mudrooroo's Aboriginal identity presumably arose as late as 1992⁶³⁶ and have never been fully elucidated, 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, it remains disturbing that an ambiguous, hybrid character such as Wadawaka, reminiscent of the author's personal biography— orphaned, African, without clear tribal links, rebellious, intelligent and domineering—is crucially inscribed in a text just preceding the conflictive affair. Then again, genetic circumscriptions of

⁶³⁴ Mudrooroo 1991: 125.

⁶³⁵ Mudrooroo 1991: 147.

⁶³⁶ Clark 2001: 50.

Aboriginality—or race for that matter—are static, restrictive and ultimately counterproductive in a world where difference is bound to meet and cross borders. Mudrooroo's 1997 analysis of the public debate on his Aboriginality is eloquent on the matter of biological ancestry: "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."⁶³⁷ This existential approach refers, of course, to his oeuvre, but also his life as an Aborigine and his commitment to the Aboriginal cause in general. How would this attitude be given shape in his literary corpus after his identity had become a 'scandal'?

4.3. 'Mistressing' the (V)empire.

In Mudrooroo's *Vampire* trilogy, enabling versions of Postcolonising Dreaming Narrative are questioned by the trilogy's gory use of Gothic, and the author presents us with a much darker fin-de-siècle reading of Aboriginality than the hope for the Native cause expressed in *Master* would have suggested. As Gerry Turcotte observes, "It begins by *announcing* the end, and in this way returns us to the tone of *Doctor Wooreddy*."⁶³⁸ At the end of *Master*, the remaining natives, amongst whom Jangamuttuk and Ludjee, manage to escape from the island in yet another, transgressive adaptation to the new times. With Wadawaka as their skilled pilot and captain, they man a vessel and put to Native use what in *Dr Wooreddy* was the ominous means of White invasion. In sailing off into the fearsome unknown, they inhabit the uncanny, female element that had confined them to their island-home. In wordings that rewrite its foil's title, *Dr Wooreddy's Prescription for the Ending of the World*, Jangamuttuk says, "We 'bout ready go and find that new world. This one finished. All finished. We go west into setting sun. End up in our promised land."⁶³⁹

Hélène Cixous analyses the uncanny as the liminal term in which the male and female principle fuse, the borderline area between life and death that inspires anxiety of dissolution but also enables a beginning on new terms.⁶⁴⁰ And indeed, in another reversal of symbolism, the Natives' journey towards the setting sun, an archetype in Western literature of finality and death, homes the reader in on a new beginning; this is made possible by Wadawaka's 'walking on water' as the Natives aptly have it, which, to them, represents a frightening merger of the songlines across the masculine and the feminine

⁶³⁷ Mudrooroo 1997b: 264.

⁶³⁸ Turcotte 2003: 145.

⁶³⁹ Mudrooroo 1991: 143.

⁶⁴⁰ Cixous 1976: 542-8. See also chapter 2, pp. 44-9.

principle. In fiction, according to Cixous, it is the ghost that most aptly embodies the fear of the unknown as that which cannot be represented.⁶⁴¹ Thus, in the uncanny liminal area where colonial reality and the Dreaming meet, the Natives are confronted with a ghostly figure turned flesh, whose sexual ambiguity has turned it into one of the most awe-inspiring exponents of Victorian Gothic—the vampire.⁶⁴² In Mudrooroo’s version, it is the White female vampire Amelia who as the un-dead mediates between the male and female principle, life and death, the familiar and the strange, the known and unknown. Not only blurring the traditional assignment of gender roles, she defies race and class boundaries from a postcolonising inscription as well. Be it true that the haunting of this female vampire distresses Natives and settlers alike, by vampirising the Empire it also subverts the colonial project; that is to say, by inscribing female sexuality in the colonial setting as both active/aggressive/threatening (to which Amelia’s oft-repeated bloody fellatio scenes testify) and passive/acquiescent/comforting (as exemplified in her rape by and sexual submission to Wadawaka), it goes beyond the rigid, binary precepts of Western master narrative. In short, one could say that the ‘v/empire’ is ‘mistressed’.

This identifies Mudrooroo’s Vampire trilogy as a series of texts that undoes the traditional binary constructions that *Master* only attempts to reverse in its search for Native empowerment: rather than denoting an inversion⁶⁴³ of roles, the vampire haunts, terrorizes and destroys all identity, taking it into the realm of deconstruction and non-representation. This obviously harks back to the haunting and destruction of Mudrooroo’s own identity in his own fin-de-siècle, the advent of the third millennium. Indeed, it would be difficult to deny the author’s personal involvement and stake in the development of the vampire plot. But while on a surface level this inscription could be taken as a misogynist configuration of a postcolonising writing project—and it is emblematic for the

⁶⁴¹ Cixous 1976: 543.

⁶⁴² See Christopher Craft 1984: 107-33. The *Britannica Concise Encyclopedia* (2006) defines the vampire as follows: “In popular legend, a bloodsucking creature that rises from its burial place at night, sometimes in the form of a bat, to drink the blood of humans. By daybreak it must return to its grave or to a coffin filled with its native earth. Tales of vampires are part of the world’s folklore, most notably in Hungary and the Balkan Peninsula. The disinterment in Serbia in 1725 and 1732 of several fluid-filled corpses that villagers claimed were behind a plague of vampirism led to widespread interest and imaginative treatment of vampirism throughout western Europe. Vampires are supposedly dead humans (originally suicides, heretics, or criminals) who maintain a kind of life by biting the necks of living humans and sucking their blood; their victims also become vampires after death. These ‘undead’ creatures cast no shadow and are not reflected in mirrors. They can be warded off by crucifixes or wreaths of garlic and can be killed by exposure to the sun or by an oak stake driven through the heart. The most famous vampire is Count Dracula from Bram Stoker’s novel *Dracula* (1897)” (See Works Cited: “vampire”).

⁶⁴³ Inversion understood as a reversal of colonial roles, such as exemplified in *Master*. Interestingly, inversion was also a term commonly used in 19th 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” (Craft 1984: 112-5).

uncanniness surrounding Mudrooroo's status in Australian society that his fiction should arouse strong notions of political incorrectness—a more complex reading may reveal the vampire figure pushing beyond class, race and gender binaries. This, indeed, would allow taking Mudrooroo's personal plight—and the authenticity debate, which affects the issue of Aboriginal identity and Australianness at large⁶⁴⁴—out of the reductive terms of biological determination. Thus, there are sound reasons to believe that Mudrooroo has made a last, undeniably warped contribution to the identity debate before leaving Australia. His promiscuous use of genre, plot and characters uncannily haunts and troubles identitarian binaries at large and pushes towards their dissolution.

No doubt the figure of the female vampire is a contemporary re-inscription of Count Dracula, who first came to life in Bram Stoker's famous instance of 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 hundred years. Not surprisingly, the sense of Gothic doom that pervades the vampire set is the product of another disappointing fin-de-siècle which saw the reductive onslaught of conservative politics on Aboriginal affairs and the concomitant personal attacks on Native-identified public figures whose biological origins were considered unclear. Thus, it is not surprising that, at exactly a century's remove, Mudrooroo should exploit the similarities between 20th-century assimilative multiculturalism and 19th-century Social Darwinism to configure an uncanny rewrite of the Count. Dracula is, after all, a character who exemplifies the Victorian concern with the pureness of blood and biological origins, and the character of Amelia picks up on the infectious notion of colonising the land and body present in Stoker's original from an Antipodean mirror perspective.

In a brilliant essay on Stoker's *Dracula*, Stephen Arata describes Count Dracula's invasion of Britain and its citizens as a Gothic form of 'reverse colonisation,' by putting the novel into the historical context of Victorian and Imperial decline at the end of the 19th century. Significantly, Stoker locates the geographical setting of Count Dracula's home, Transylvania, in an inaccessible part of Rumania, a country which embodied the meeting of East and West and materialised as the locus of Imperial strife. Here, Western powers had long fought out their expansive impulses and Rumania was known, therefore, "as part of the vexed 'Eastern question.'"⁶⁴⁵ This troubling issue also included the process of

⁶⁴⁴ See chapter 1.

⁶⁴⁵ Arata 1990: 627. Note how the Eastern question ties in with Edward Said's concept of Orientalism—see chapter 2, 49-50.

balkanisation, and interestingly, the origins of the vampire can be placed in the Balkan Peninsula. From Serbia its disturbing tales reached Western Europe in the early 18th century that roused “widespread interest and imaginative treatment of vampirism,” appealing intensely to the popular imagination.⁶⁴⁶ This was the first step in a development in which the process of balkanisation uncannily spilled over its own borders and led to the First World War, which was triggered off by the assassination of the heir to the Austro-Hungarian kingdom by a Serbian nationalist in Sarajevo in 1914. Here our postcolonial interest in the uncanny comes full circle because it was the alienating anxiety this war between the great European powers generated that provoked Freud’s interest in the concept. Thus, the uncanny and the vampire can be seen to link up through their territorial dimension. The Imperial-colonial aspect of the vampire is profiled in its origins in territorial loss and fragmentation, and the anxiety this generates is underlined in its necessity to rest in “native earth.” The impossible repression of the lasting trauma territorial loss and fragmentation generate can be understood to be uncannily reflected in the “undead” creature’s haunting powers.⁶⁴⁷

Stoker’s *Dracula* emulates Western invasive behaviour in the journey of the solicitor’s clerk Jonathan Harker to Transylvania, but this consumed orientalist is soon at a loss by his penetration of the unknown. Count Dracula, however, is configured as his dark mirror image, a skilled ‘occidental’ who *does* successfully invade Britain, and uncannily evokes the distant brutality of colonial violence in the Metropole. Indeed, *Dracula*’s Gothic fantasy of reverse colonisation acts out geopolitical fears about the Other’s capacity to strike back as well as cultural guilt for the annihilation of Other civilisations: “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.”⁶⁴⁸ In *Wooreddy* and *Master*, this bad faith allows Mudrooroo to script the act of Imperial colonisation itself as monstrous from the perspective of the Natives. This Imperial haunting is taken to unsuspected Gothic extremes in his vampire set.

Ken Gelder notes that, in Thomas Scott’s first map of Tasmania published in 1830, the name Transylvania had been used to describe a large blank—an uncharted part of the island that became the setting of Mudrooroo’s *Wooreddy* and *Master* and starting point of

⁶⁴⁶ See Works Cited: “vampire”.

⁶⁴⁷ See Works Cited: “vampire”.

⁶⁴⁸ Arata 1990: 634.

the mob's journey into the unknown. As the name testifies⁶⁴⁹, this Antipodean Transylvania denoted an inaccessible forested and mountainous area, reminiscent of what was later to become the Count's Rumanian home. Due to its characteristics of inaccessibility, wildness and uncomfortable closeness to Empire, the Rumanian Transylvania would become associated with the vampiric imaginary in the Victorian mind. Not surprisingly, the Tasmanian Transylvania lay beyond the infamous 'blackline' which marked the border between white 'civilisation' and the as yet unexplored realm of the remaining Natives who were heavily pursued and almost driven to extermination by the settlers.⁶⁵⁰ To the colonial mind the Tasmanian Transylvania "nominate[d] a region which lies under the shadow of—but is still, for the moment, outside—colonisation."⁶⁵¹ Thus, it is only logical that Mudrooroo should invert this notion and describe the mob's journey to their 'promised land', the Australian mainland, as one into the uncanny home of the v/empire. In *Dracula's* boundary-crossing travel narrative "[v]ampires 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."⁶⁵² Likewise, the trilogy's Natives are troubled by a White vampire, who especially haunts Wadawaka (an adopted African) and George (a half-caste) since their racial boundaries are tenuous. Thus, Stephen Arata writes that "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."⁶⁵³ Similarly, Mudrooroo's *Vampire* trilogy depicts the continuation of Jangamuttuk's songline as a Gothic journey into the liminal area of the colonial uncanny, so as to interrogate Imperial notions of race, class and gender.

George is Fada/Sir George Augustus Robinson's half-caste son by Ludjee and named after him, which betrays his biological origins despite being adopted by Jangamuttuk. His hybrid status, youthful inexperience and lack of inscription into

⁶⁴⁹ Trans (L) = across; silva (L) = forest.

⁶⁵⁰ 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 Natives. It formed part of the so-called Tasmanian 'Black Wars', which probably lasted from 1803 to the 1830s and denotes the repeated intents of the White colonizers to decimate the Native 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 under the care of George Augustus Robinson. Although the genocidal view has recently been contested by Australian historians such as Keith Windschuttle (2002), who maintains a benign settlement paradigm, the latter has in turn been criticised as inaccurate and untrue by other scholars (see for instance Robert Manne e.a. 2003).

⁶⁵¹ Gelder 1994: 1.

⁶⁵² Arata 1990: 629.

⁶⁵³ Arata 1990: 626.

Aboriginal manhood make him most 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.”⁶⁵⁴ Thus, the vampiric infection that will change him physically and spiritually is a simple extension of the Social-Darwinist notion of stronger and weaker blood that translates the colonial condition of White domination into genetics. In this view, George is lost for the Native cause because his biological father's blood will take over; this is metaphorically represented by vampiric contamination, which itself stands for colonisation as an infectious disease.⁶⁵⁵ Indeed, Natives literally fell prey to imported European illnesses which often decimated populations. This, together with the racist notion of weak blood, fed back into the “doomed race” paradigm⁶⁵⁶ which dictated that the Aborigines were condemned to extinction in the face of White civilisation. Nature's immutable law of ‘survival of the fittest’ would then justify the policy of the Stolen Generations by which half-caste children were separated from their Aboriginal kin and fostered out to White parents. This usually meant the traumatic and at times irreparable loss of their Aboriginal identity, and from a Native point of view, these children were effectively ‘Othered’ into specimens of White civilisation.

In order to express how, in such an assimilative policy, cultural deracination is effected and justified along biological lines, Mudrooroo aptly inverts the vampiric metaphor:

... 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.⁶⁵⁷

Amelia acts similarly in imposing the scathing effects of White colonisation onto the Natives, and not surprisingly, from a narrative perspective she takes over focalisation time and again in the trilogy. George's story starts out as a Native yarn at a campfire,⁶⁵⁸ but as

⁶⁵⁴ Mudrooroo 1998: 2.

⁶⁵⁵ Cf. Pearson 2003: 190.

⁶⁵⁶ See chapter 2, p. 82.

⁶⁵⁷ Arata 1990: 630.

⁶⁵⁸ Mudrooroo: 1998: 1.

the vampiric infection progresses, Amelia invades his mind and takes over the telling. Thus, Maureen Clark aptly observes that “[a]s the trilogy’s other first-person narrator, Amelia ‘punctures’ George’s account at regular intervals,”⁶⁵⁹ and this effectively deflates/deconstructs the possibilities of the popular genre of Native auto/biography, practised by authors like Sally Morgan, Ruby Langford Ginibi, Doris Pilkerton and Glenyse Ward, as a means to recover an ‘authentic’ sense of Aboriginality. This is underscored by the fact that George is “the undying”⁶⁶⁰ who “exists in the liminal space of the un-dead” and whose inscription in the genre of ‘*life-writing*’ is therefore ambiguous, if not out of place.⁶⁶¹

As if to underline the inexorability of White domination, throughout the trilogy George mostly appears in his Dream-animal shape, a dingo who is turned into Amelia’s obedient, “faithful ... doggy”⁶⁶² and under whose psychic control he is unable to change back to his human shape. As colonial control is often configured through the sexual, Amelia also uses him as a toy in her sexual exploits: engaged in cunnilingus, he literally turns into her “lapdog”⁶⁶³ and symbolises Amelia’s genital area. This also harks back to the “animal companion with open jaws and snapping teeth” of classical art, which might accompany a beautiful woman and “represented her deadly genital trap and evil intent.”⁶⁶⁴ Lastly, as ‘Dingo’ he is made a faithful pet to the unlikely family unit of Wadawaka and Amelia, the *moma*/mummy ghost,⁶⁶⁵ under the protection of a large womb-like cavern. The latter is, indeed, an Australian realm of the dead that, with its immense guardian dog/dingo, underground river and ferryman, resembles 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, in which the Greek myth of the spring goddess Persephone, a fertility symbol of sorts, is reconfigured so as to enact a warped story of female empowerment and to comment on the state of Aboriginality. Persephone was also known as the earth goddess Kore—indeed, the name of the vessel that carried Amelia to Australia and reminiscent of the earth Amelia needs to rest in—and as such abducted by Hades, the king of the underworld, to become his bride. The latter harks back

⁶⁵⁹ Clark 2006: 129

⁶⁶⁰ Mudrooroo 1998: 1.

⁶⁶¹ Pearson 2003: 190.

⁶⁶² Mudrooroo 1999: 103.

⁶⁶³ Mudrooroo 2000: 32.

⁶⁶⁴ Creed 1993: 108.

⁶⁶⁵ In the series, on the Australian mainland the Aboriginal communities speak of *moma* in reference to the White ‘ghostly’ settlers. The phonetics suggest a link with mother or ‘momma’/‘mummy’.

to another Lord of Darkness, Count Dracula, who in Mudrooroo's fiction weds Amelia by vampirising her. It also connects to Wadawaka, whose dark skin colour is subsumed under the darkness of her natural habitat and points towards a racial hybridising 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. It was her voice which was fluid, unrolling in a breathless monotone in my mind. Her toneless voice droned on, drawing me into her in sympathy. "Here I am queen of this underground," she declared without passion. "Here I am far from the sun and in full command, thus I am a queen and what does a queen need but a king ... 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 face is twisted as if you hate me. How can we be enemies, when we are similar?"⁶⁶⁶

In her unnatural underground madness, Amelia controls Wadawaka with sex and hallucinogenic mushrooms—perhaps a metaphor for the “numbing”⁶⁶⁷ effects of White civilisation—so as to replace her previous “dark lord”, Dracula, and makes him the adoptive father to two Aboriginal babies. Belying the reproductive potential Persephone represents, these “two tiny *tykes*”⁶⁶⁸ have been abducted to complete Amelia's nuclear family and feed on her blood. This introduces an anti-natural form of regeneration as they transform into vampires themselves.

Mudrooroo also emulates and rewrites the role of the upper gods Zeus and Demeter in the retrieval of their daughter from the underworld by scripting the magic intervention of the tribal leaders Jangamuttuk and Ludjee in Amelia's dark affairs. The

⁶⁶⁶ Mudrooroo 1999: 80.

⁶⁶⁷ Note that *Wooreddy* as well as the *Master* series use the Native term *num* to describe the ghostly colonisers, reminiscent of the English word for passivity and insensitivity, *numb*.

⁶⁶⁸ Mudrooroo 1999: 104.

loss of two important members of their clan—one their pilot and the other their only seed for the future—and the abduction of the two native children propel them to a descent into the cavern and a confrontation with un/death. Because their shamanic powers and firm identities make them more resistant to Amelia's wiles, their adoptive sons are returned to the realm of the living. Yet, a price is exacted for their Native power play: Ludjee and Jangamuttuk disappear from the narrative only to reappear for display at the London World Fair of 1850, and Amelia boils her vampiric 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.⁶⁶⁹ Additionally, he draws on the Greek myth of Lamia, a dark queen of the Classical Lybia, which was a racially indeterminate area at the northern limits of the "Dark Continent."⁶⁷⁰ Lamia's two children were taken away after having an extramarital affair with Zeus, and in her maddening grief she turned into the child-killing monster that Amelia re-enacts. Thus, in a masterful stroke, Mudrooroo denounces the unnatural perfidiousness of the Stolen Generation policy, which—metaphorically speaking—sucked away the lifeblood of Indigenous Australia and constituted yet another step in the Social-Darwinist genocidal policy that defined Aboriginality in terms of biological authenticity.⁶⁷¹

Whereas Wadawaka is under Amelia's spell, he is immune to her bite because his "blood is as sea water to a thirsty man,"⁶⁷² a quality shared with Ludjee, whose "blood is too strong for [Amelia]."⁶⁷³ As a vampire, Amelia is connected to the earth and cannot overcome the freedom the sea represents for both. The kind of power Amelia wields over him is therefore of a different kind, and links back to the strong sexual undercurrents in vampire fiction as epitomised in Count Dracula's tale. Stephen Arata holds that Stoker's

⁶⁶⁹ Clark 2006: 124.

⁶⁷⁰ The Dark Continent was a name often used in the 19th century to denote Sub-Saharan Africa, whose interior was basically unknown and left dark by mapmakers. In Freudian terms, it is also used to refer 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' (p. 212). She further explains that Freud borrowed the term from the colonial exploits in Africa, and that "[h]is 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 description of a "dark forest—virgin, hostile, impenetrable"—which uncannily harks back to Transylvania/Tasmania, the castrating vampiress's home (see "Dark Continent" in Works Cited).

⁶⁷¹ See chapters 1 and 2.

⁶⁷² Mudrooroo 2000: 227.

⁶⁷³ Mudrooroo 1998: 121.

fiction is concerned with imperial anxieties in which heroines represent the dangers that threaten modern life,⁶⁷⁴ and Mudrooroo cleverly returns this fear postcolonially in the shape of a 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”⁶⁷⁵ by receiving a stake through her heart, from which, not surprisingly, she suffers an orgasmic death.

This seems to suggest that no pleasure is greater than (little) death. In other words, the greatest pleasure of all is achieved in a coupling of the male and female principle, and such a dissolution of the subject and deconstruction of identity homes in on Hélène Cixous’ gendered account of the uncanny.⁶⁷⁶ Subjected to an intense debate on his racial and gendered identity—is he an Aborigine, is he a misogynist?—Mudrooroo bends Cixous’ argument across a gendered as well as racial axis in his vampire trilogy. Amelia also receives a phallic correction, but of a different kind; in what starts out as a violent rape at the hands of Wadawaka, who is seduced by her attractive White female shape, Mudrooroo configures a scene of pornographic thrust in which she suffers the proverbial little death, loses her virginity and claims her new dark/black ‘master’:

He is a perfect example of ... ‘savage manhood;’ though this, although he is naked and black, does not exactly suit him ... His English is perfect though his skin is black, and so I appeal to the gentleman which might be within him. “Sir, release me: I meant you no harm. I am a virgin and have been hiding here from those who would harm me.” He makes no reply, I struggle, using all my strength in an effort to throw him off and get at his throat. It is then that he gives a grunt and I feel him enter me, tearing past whatever defences still remain and piercing to my very vitals. I give a shriek. I have never known a man in this way and am afraid. Then I feel my body responding and try to rake his face with my nails, try to get at him with my fangs, but I am mortified as he laughs and continues to violate me. He holds my good hand in one of his and bobs and weaves his face away from my fangs ... “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

⁶⁷⁴ Arata 1990: 625.

⁶⁷⁵ Craft 1984: 124.

⁶⁷⁶ See chapter 2, pp. 44-9.

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."⁶⁷⁷

This last comment causes Amelia to identify Wadawaka as John Summers, the first free black Englishman, whom her father counselled in the defence of his case; Summers had rebelled against the British philanthropists who had fraudulently pocketed money destined to the Sierra Leone colony,⁶⁷⁸ for which he was convicted and sent off to Australia.⁶⁷⁹ Wadawaka's pledge to freedom prefigures the disastrous *denouement* of their underground family. However, it also points forward to a scene of 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.

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.⁶⁸⁰ Significantly, 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 1851.⁶⁸¹ The phallic "long bulk of the Great Britain, lamps gleaming ... along her monstrous length" has penetrated the Australian mainland "as great and as oppressive as the empire that built it."⁶⁸² 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

⁶⁷⁷ Mudrooroo 1998: 187-9.

⁶⁷⁸ At the end of the 18th c 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 2003: 26-8)

⁶⁷⁹ Mudrooroo 1998: 190.

⁶⁸⁰ Mudrooroo 2000: 225.

⁶⁸¹ Mudrooroo 2000: 200, 222.

⁶⁸² Mudrooroo 2000: 219.

feet in length,” he moaned, plunging hard into her. “Deeper, deeper,” Becky moaned in unison, bent over, and staring at the ship ...⁶⁸³

Their fetishist fascination with the ‘Great Britain’ reveals their real obsession: the vessel is their means of visiting the London World Fair of 1850, where Sir George plans to display the handful of remaining Tasmanians as well as an enormous gold slab. The latter should 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, an apt metaphor for the greed underlying the colonial project, has been baptised the Golden Fleece due its uncommon aspect resembling a sheepskin. This reference to Classical myth inscribes the gold find into the issue of paternal legitimacy, as Jason and the Argonauts embarked on a quest for the Golden Fleece to place him as 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 are precisely 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, on the other hand, “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.”⁶⁸⁴ Obviously not the rightful owners of the gold, these tricksters have dispossessed the Natives of their natural resources. Not surprisingly, Sir George concocts a story to justify and file his exploitation claim after his police force has perpetrated some 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,”⁶⁸⁵ which is indeed an argument with 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. Strategically located as a postscript, finalising the fictional triptych, an extract from Her

⁶⁸³ Mudrooroo 2000: 229.

⁶⁸⁴ Mudrooroo 2000: 10-1.

⁶⁸⁵ Mudrooroo 2000: 197.

Majesty's Diary evidences that the Queen is greatly attracted by the Golden Fleece, "which bodes well for the future of the colony."⁶⁸⁶ This interest raises doubts over the Queen's colonial authority, as the Golden Fleece is a stolen property and the issue of paternal legitimacy embedded in the myth automatically disenfranchises a lady's rule. Furthermore, it conjures up an uncanny connection with Amelia, whom the queen describes as a "strong wom[a]n of the empire."⁶⁸⁷ By placing these musings at the end of *The Promised Land*, Mudrooroo seems to suggest that as Head of the British Empire, Queen Victoria is the incarnation of Victorious Empire, the Supreme V/Empire or dominant Dark Lady who sucks the colonies dry from their wealth and propagates White civilisation. Thus, this textual manoeuvre, which harks back to Harker's celebratory afterword, apparently suggests Amelia's final victory/Victoria over Australia.

The comparison has further uncanny connections which reach out from the past to the present, as Mudrooroo also scripts Amelia as Eliza Frazer's sister, "a controversial figure in Australia's mythologies of nationhood."⁶⁸⁸ Kay Schaffer's in-depth study of the character observes that she is believed to be "the first white female shipwreck victim facing 'the natives' in a remote and uncharted area of Australia,"⁶⁸⁹ and was allegedly sexually abused by them. However, her biography is fraught with tantalising ambiguities, and, according to Maureen Clark, "conflicting and contradictory. Some lean towards representing the Aboriginal people as her rapists and enslavers. Others see her in a much different light as a temptress and wanton colonial woman."⁶⁹⁰ Not surprisingly, Amelia functions—more than a sister—as Eliza's empowered uncanny alter ego:

I was Amelia Fraser and I had a sister, Eliza. Now that life is finished with and I have entered into some, far different state of existence. I am something else, and perhaps it is better than what I would have become. Before I was as other girls. Now I am perhaps far worse than females such as my sister Eliza ...⁶⁹¹

As naming and renaming play such an important role in Mudrooroo's fiction, the link between Eliza and another, contemporary Elizabeth should not be missed. Thus, one

⁶⁸⁶ Mudrooroo 2000: 233.

⁶⁸⁷ Mudrooroo 2000: 232.

⁶⁸⁸ Clark 2006: 127.

⁶⁸⁹ Schaffer 1995: xiii.

⁶⁹⁰ Clark 2006: 127.

⁶⁹¹ Mudrooroo 1998: 66.

might apply Gerry Turcotte's words on Eliza Fraser to the present Queen of Britain and Australia, "go[ing] from mother of empire to symbol of female moral degradation."⁶⁹² If we may read Elizabeth II as the supreme female sign of postcolonial depravity, the V/Empire is indeed no Master but a Mistress who obviously bodes no well for the colony's future.

Throughout the trilogy Amelia is projected as a depraved, shifty, uncanny character beyond the grasp of the ordinary, which is precisely what makes her frightening and monstrous. Mudrooroo's configuration of Amelia not only responds to the subliminal racial anxiety in Stoker's original but also the sexual ambiguities projected through the count, which thrive on trespassing the limits of Victorian gender discourse. In a brilliant analysis of the homoeroticism subjacent in *Dracula*, Christopher Craft shows how the Victorian obsession with the blurring of gender definitions is configured as a monstrous threat to the heterosexual norm. Craft draws on 19th c. theories of sexual inversion, which described the homosexual as a male body with a female soul/desire, to analyse the specific casting of the vampire threat and the figure 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.⁶⁹³

Foremost in this monstrous configuration of ambiguous sexuality—male/female, active/passive—is the:

Vampire Mouth, the central and recurring image of the novel ... 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

⁶⁹² Turcotte 2003: 143.

⁶⁹³ Craft 1984: 115.

piercing bone, the vampire mouth fuses and confuses ... the gender-based categories of the penetrating and the receptive.⁶⁹⁴

This soft yet toothed mouth invokes Barbara Creed's description of "the mythical *vagina dentata* which threatens to devour, to castrate via incorporation,"⁶⁹⁵ and not surprisingly, Count Dracula engages in the "systematic creation of *female* surrogates who enact his will and desire"⁶⁹⁶ and propagate the vampiric infection.

In configuring Amelia as Dracula's offspring, Mudrooroo follows the misogynistic lines laid down in Stoker's original but also reworks this inscription of sexual ambivalence as the monstrous feminine with some significant twists; he configures a bisexual female vampire and empowers her as the fundamental player on the colonial scene. Drawing on what Maureen Clark calls a "gross, female stereotype [Mudrooroo] 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."⁶⁹⁷ Class difference being the general backdrop to Australian colonisation, consisting of either deported convicts or impoverished British subjects in search of colonial gain, Amelia's lower-class origins reveal 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.⁶⁹⁸

Male domestic violence decodes her depraved behaviour as a form of gendered retaliation, but her lower-class origins also explain why it is never covered up with the

⁶⁹⁴ Craft 1984: 109.

⁶⁹⁵ Creed 1993: 157.

⁶⁹⁶ Craft 1984: 109 (my emphasis).

⁶⁹⁷ Clark 2006: 125.

⁶⁹⁸ Mudrooroo 1998: 68.

soothing cloak of the count's aristocratic decorum, whose depravations remain elegantly implicit and undercoded in Stoker's original.⁶⁹⁹

Whereas in the Victorian original Gothic fear and revulsion are grounded on not naming the sexual act, the vampire trilogy articulates them through sexual explicitness, verging on porn and gore; 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)."⁷⁰⁰ Amelia's sexuality is depraved because of its ambivalence: she makes no distinction between young or old, white or black, rich or poor, man or woman, and confuses life all too often with death itself. Her sex is overpowering and cannibalistic, and uncannily aligns the consumption of blood with semen, which she glosses as "white blood."⁷⁰¹ Exemplary of her uncanny confusion of sex with death is a gory scene which involves Captain Torrens, a cruel colonial soldier with the capacity to change into a werebear, and his wife. As so often when confronted with men, she cleverly uses submissive behaviour and vampiric strength to subdue her victim:

I get to my feet and fling myself at his. "Sir, my saviour, what am I to do now? What am I to do, alone in this land without kith or kin?" His hands grip me and drag me up. I allow myself to be drawn halfway up his body, then cling to his hips, burying my face into his thigh and then into his hard groin. "Sir, advise me, help me," I cry, suppressing a laugh, for I have regained my confidence. I reach out and imprison his hands in a loose grip which I can tighten when he reacts. Using one of my fangs delicately, I slit the front of his trousers and take his strong and virile member in my mouth. He grunts as I set to work and so heated is he that his white blood spurts copiously after mere seconds, but such a creature is he that he continues to be erect. 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

⁶⁹⁹ Pearson 2003: 195.

⁷⁰⁰ Pearson 2003: 195.

⁷⁰¹ Mudrooroo 1998: 68, 148.

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 ...⁷⁰²

In a savage attack masquerading as compassion and female solidarity, the vampiress then relentlessly turns on Torrens' long-abused wife:

“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.”⁷⁰³

Amelia shows herself to be a boundary crosser without any restrictions of class, race or gender to suit her predatory needs. Indeed, not only does she invert stereotypes by cannibalizing civilised behaviour and bodies to feed and please herself, but also preys on the Natives, whose eucalyptus-tanged blood and semen she prefers. Many of these, whether young or old, she ‘sucks dry’ to death, and others she converts, such as George and Gunatinga or Dungeater. 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 is turned into her servant and renamed Renfiel, in close reference to Count Dracula’s untrustworthy servant.⁷⁰⁴ Gunatinga puts into profile the performative identity of many of the trilogy’s characters: not only does he appear as Renfiel, but also as Galbol Wednga or Singer of Whales, Moma Kopa or Spirit Master,

⁷⁰² Mudrooroo 1998: 148-9.

⁷⁰³ Mudrooroo 1998: 149.

⁷⁰⁴ Mudrooroo 1998: 93.

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. Not surprisingly, his submission to Amelia translates into a merging of the masculine and feminine, which draws the issue of racial identity into the realm of gender.

If there were still any doubts about the all-consuming polyvalence of Amelia's sexuality, her relationship with Lady Lucy, Sir George's upper-middleclass wife, drives this fundamental ambivalence fully home:

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.⁷⁰⁵

The latter scene (con)fuses penetration, reception and ejaculation completely. Amelia's fangs usurp the penile function in piercing Lucy's neck, but this is 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, indeed, uncannily circulate through each other and—to follow Hélène Cixous' account—come together as a frightening yet 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

⁷⁰⁵ Mudrooroo 2000: 8 (my emphasis).

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.⁷⁰⁶

For all the depraved undertones in Amelia's sexual-cannibalistic behaviour, an image of tenuous hope is offered on the final pages of *The Promised Land*, which announce some kind of bonding between Wadawaka and Amelia that would (em)brace the binary realms of Life and Death, Male and Female, and Black and White. For better or for worse—as the White presence in Australia cannot be undone—Wadawaka and Amelia's hybrid (re)union suggests a possible future for Australia:

She turned around and wrapped her arms about him. She was a pale streak of loveliness across the dark length of his body, seemingly embedded in it as a streak of silver ore ... “How could such as I imprison you with these thin bonds? The softness is in your mind and that is what appeals to me” “The whip hardens the body, but stripes the mind,” the man said bitterly. “To have been a slave is to be maimed.” “Well, well, well, I'm as much a slave to you as you are to me, for we own each other ... We are both free spirits and refuse to accept ownership of others.” “Yes we have our liberty, though where we are going I will be below the white, and in other places my freedom would be a matter of documents. I have been owned and that is an experience not to be borne.” “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.”⁷⁰⁷

Wadawaka is an uncanny hybrid whose identity has floated “from black slave to black gentleman to black savage to whaler to highwayman and then back to John Summers.” This causes Amelia to exclaim, “Who, I wonder, must he think he is?”⁷⁰⁸ and

⁷⁰⁶ Mudrooroo 2000: 213.

⁷⁰⁷ Mudrooroo 2000: 227-8.

⁷⁰⁸ Mudrooroo 2000: 184.

indeed, Wadawaka's blackness is inscribed in universalising terms. In a promiscuous literary cross-over to Herman Melville, at the end of *Underground* Wadawaka embarks on Captain Ahab's hunt of Moby Dick, an immense white, phallic sperm whale which Mudrooroo rewrites as a sexually ambiguous symbol of Empire:

Such a strange vessel; such a strange skipper. A Yankee who lived only to kill the white whale. They called her Moby Dick, believing that only a male could wreak such havoc, whereas I dubbed her *The Empire* ... [M]y fellows regaled me with stories that refused to accept the monster as a blind force of nature, but one filled with all the cunning of the so-called civilised; in short, the empire which rules our lives as surely as that Moby Dick ruled Ahab, sending him on a morbid chase across the seven seas.⁷⁰⁹

Wadawaka's chase exemplifies a solidary concept of black resistance reminiscent of *Master's* pan-Aboriginality, as his hunting "fellows" are a native American Indian, an African and a Polynesian respectively. They are equally intent on "slaying that great white monster which mocked us with her invulnerability,"⁷¹⁰ which they eventually achieve at great cost. Thus, the text seems to suggest that limiting, biological definitions of Blackness and Aboriginality should be forsaken and exchanged for cultural inscriptions based on shared experience. Wadawaka's quest lasts until the end of the trilogy, when, with Moby Dick killed, he is ready to confront the luring enemy at home: Amelia, "good and mad and just as bad a white beast."⁷¹¹

However, Amelia is no clear-cut symbol of Imperial oppression but much more uncannily shaped. She indicates how a 'native' connection to the Antipodean soil, figured as feminine, has changed/hybridised her as much as Wadawaka: "Within her, 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."⁷¹² In apparent allusion to the terms of contemporary Reconciliation, the prospect of Wadawaka and Amelia's union seems fraught with difficulties due to Amelia's overpowering presence. However, the land also becomes the unifying element between them, as "it flows over us in all its glory" and the bedroom awaits their love match. "[C]linging together so that they had to manoeuvre their united

⁷⁰⁹ Mudrooroo 2000: 172-3.

⁷¹⁰ Mudrooroo 2000: 174.

⁷¹¹ Mudrooroo 2000: 171.

⁷¹² Mudrooroo 2000: 226.

bulk through the narrow doorway,” they pass George, the last survivor of the Tasmanian mob, who stays guard outside in his Dingo shape.⁷¹³ Thus, Amelia and Wadawaka’s shapeless, “united bulk” enters the narrow matrix of Australia and rewrites the invasive phallic “long bulk of the *Great Britain*”⁷¹⁴ moored in the harbour.

One might ask if this finale implies some kind of R/reconciliation between the Indigenous and the foreign element on Australian soil in contemporary terms, although Wadawaka’s status as Indigenous Australian is as uncertain as Mudrooroo’s is contested. Likewise, George’s future prospects as only survivor with Aboriginal blood are befuddled by his inferior status as Amelia’s lapdog.⁷¹⁵ Then again, in the face of the contaminating, genocidal onslaught of White civilisation over the last two centuries, the blood question in Indigeneity is riddled with problems, as many ‘Aborigines’ nowadays can only make tenuous claims to genetic ancestry and have to reformulate their Indigenous identity through cultural, lived experience. This would obviously apply to Sally Morgan and Mudrooroo himself. Because Wadawaka’s Native inscription is troubled—partly because it is ‘only’ cultural, partly due to the uncanny mirroring of the author in this character—one should also shun reading Amelia as a simple Gothic metaphor of the pernicious impact of Western civilisation on Native Australia. Amelia’s fundamental race, gender and class ambivalence constitutes her as a highly complex character which reads into the issue of (post)colonial (dis)possession in ways at once uncanny and frightening: it borders on political incorrectness and harks back to the unsteady, contested status that the author himself has acquired in Australia. Although Amelia does seem to acquire some acquiescence in her reconciliation with Wadawaka—perhaps a metaphor for the author’s acceptance of his own, ‘muddled’ identity—her preying across racial, class and gender difference has been relentless, ruthless, and sparing no-one. Bearing in mind Hélène Cixous’ gendered interpretation of the uncanny, is it possible to read Amelia’s predatory obsession with (little) death beyond total destruction, as a postcolonising attempt at a new beginning for Australia?

Indeed, such an interpretation of Amelia can be achieved through the influential theories on decolonisation developed by the French-Caribbean psychoanalyst Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*⁷¹⁶ and *Wretched of the Earth*.⁷¹⁷ Mudrooroo was

⁷¹³ Mudrooroo 2000: 228.

⁷¹⁴ Mudrooroo 2000: 219.

⁷¹⁵ Turcotte 2005: 115.

⁷¹⁶ First French publication 1952, first English translation 1967.

⁷¹⁷ First French publication 1961, first English translation 1963.

familiar with these through his academic career and allegedly used them in shaping his vampire trilogy.⁷¹⁸ Samira Kawash brilliantly links Fanon's ideas on postcolonial violence and identitarian deconstruction by developing the metaphor of vampiric terror. Kawash's point of departure is Fanon's notion that the violence of decolonisation, as exemplified by terrorism, is always in excess of its means, because it is in part instrumental (a dialectic means to an end) and in part absolute (beyond means and ends). Fanon postulates that this excess will give way to a new world in a non-dialectic way, signalling a rupture rather than a reformation of the past.⁷¹⁹ According to Kawash, the vampire fits admirably into such a rupture with the old through the figure of terror/ism:

In its postcolonial incarnation ... 'terrorism' stands as the violence of decolonisation gone global. The threat of decolonisation as Fanon describes it is the threat of the end of this world, a destruction necessary to clear the way for a new birth ... the terrorist is always more than the terrorist, always in excess ... In this sense, terrorism is a spectre that haunts social order and public safety ... This is ... 'spectral violence,' the measure of a violence that is never fully materialized, that is always in excess of its apparent material effects and that is 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 ... The Lacanian translation of uncanny as *extimité* 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.⁷²⁰

Fanon's absolute violence of decolonization is "outside representation" and therefore located in a "zone of non-being."⁷²¹ This non-symbolised part of reality returns as what

⁷¹⁸ Turcotte 2005: 107-8.

⁷¹⁹ Kawash 1999: 237.

⁷²⁰ Kawash 1999: 238-9. Lacan's defines '*extimité*' (E. 'extimacy') topologically as that which is "strange to me, although it is at the heart of me" (Lacan 1992: 71).

⁷²¹ Kawash 1999: 244.

Slavoj Žižek calls spectral apparitions,⁷²² which mark the uncanny limits of the symbolic order. Similarly, Kawash “consider[s] the zone of nonbeing 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 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.”⁷²³

Thus, the vampire *literalizes* the contradiction of the colonised’s existence as non-existent, imposed by the colonial relationship.⁷²⁴ In the patient’s nightmares the vampire turns into a woman, whom he initially takes for his own mother, violently killed by a French soldier, but 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.”⁷²⁵ Whereas Fanon does not elaborate on the intersection of gender and race in this circulation of bodies, Kawash highlights their interconnection. The colonial circulation of blood implies racial contamination and interpenetration; the sexualizing of the extraction of colonial value, native virility being drained by the colonizer as the castrating woman; the fluidity of the subject; and bodies becoming non-beings 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 ... 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)

⁷²² See chapter 2, p. 88.

⁷²³ Kawash 1999: 245.

⁷²⁴ Kawash 1999: 246.

⁷²⁵ Kawash 1999: 249.

nor dead (as the landscape or the colonized bodies filling that landscape). The vampire marks the ‘not-all’ of colonial reality.⁷²⁶

Thus, Kawash concludes that since “the vampire terrorizes reality,” logically “the vampire is a terrorist.”⁷²⁷ He suggests that:

... the spectral violence of terrorism is a threat to reality itself. ‘Terrorism’ is therefore figured discursively as the site of a radical alterity—‘pure evil’—that must be absolutely excluded in order to guarantee the security of social order ... 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.⁷²⁸

Obviously, Mudrooroo’s vampiress is inserted at the violent centre of postcolonial deconstruction, and as the all-devouring monstrous feminine she participates in contaminating, sexualising, emasculating, dissolving and suspending the racial economy. She actively participates in the colonial search for the Golden Fleece through sexual and cannibalistic pursuit in which she kills and emasculates natives and settlers alike, renders identity fluid by crossing established cultural and genetic borders, and infects her ‘whiteness’ to the natives creating un-dead non-beings such as George, Renfiel and Wadawaka. Amelia, then, is the elusive postcolonising terrorist whose omnipresent action impacts across race, gender and class divisions; whose indistinct, bloody vengeance on humankind knows nor respects cultural or biological barriers; and whose inescapable non-presence heralds the coming of a new identity, reminiscent of all but without a definite shape, and therefore uncannily terrifying and monstrous. This leads Gerry Turcotte to the claim that Mudrooroo, rather than returning to *Wooreddy’s* nihilistic discourse, promiscuously lays bare a series of European M/master-narratives ‘to

⁷²⁶ Kawash 1999: 249.

⁷²⁷ Kawash 1999: 253-4.

⁷²⁸ Kawash 1999: 255-6.

expose their hidden agendas: once again, the author is tantalisingly 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,”⁷²⁹ but this rather blurs than fixes its corporeal and cultural borders.

Wendy Pearson, a female critic, reaches similar conclusions by analysing Mudrooroo’s scripting of Amelia through Homi Bhabha’s ideas on colonial mimicry and Judith Butler’s conceptualisation of gender performance. Amelia is an instance of repetitive behaviour that necessarily deviates from the original it tries to copy.⁷³⁰ This performative ‘imperfection’ allows Pearson to disentangle the race and gender issues underlying Mudrooroo’s troubling inscription of the colonial vampiress. She holds that “[i]n Amelia Fraser ... [readers] encounter a dramatic historical re-vision of the story of Eliza Fraser ... [T]his particular figure of the European woman becomes not the victim of Aboriginal atrocity but the perpetrator of closely detailed acts of degradation and savagery.” According to Pearson, Amelia’s sexual/racial depravations are so over-coded in the vampire trilogy that they question the implicit race, gender and class discourses projected through Stoker’s original.⁷³¹ This would turn the vampiress into an intentionally imperfect postcolonising rewriting of Dracula. While the Count’s “deconstructive potential hinges ... on the indeterminacy of its existence between life and death,” significantly glossed by Pearson as the realm of sexual indefiniteness and bisexuality,⁷³² Amelia takes this to further postmodernising and postcolonising extremes. Pearson speaks of the Count as “a figure of the horror of indeterminacy, which ... 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.”⁷³³

While Amelia participates in such a destabilizing definition of vampirism, Mudrooroo’s vampiress is, rather than a reversal of Dracula inscribed in the European tradition, “more optimistically hybrid.”⁷³⁴ This is implied by George’s transformation and

⁷²⁹ Turcotte 2003: 147.

⁷³⁰ See chapter 2, pp. 88-90.

⁷³¹ Pearson 2003: 196. See also Turcotte (2003: 146-7) on this matter, and Clark (2006: 126), who depicts Amelia’s character as ‘excessive’.

⁷³² Pearson 2003: 186-7. Pearson takes her cue from Elaine Showalter (1990: 179).

⁷³³ Pearson 2003: 187.

⁷³⁴ Pearson 2003: 190-2.

survival, captain Torrens/the werebear's defeat and Amelia's tentative submission to Wadawaka. Therefore Gerry Turcotte holds that Mudrooroo's vampiress:

... demonstrate[s] that the very idea of an isolated and pure whiteness has always been an impossibility. If Kawash is correct in maintaining that, for Fanon, "on the other side" of the irruption of absolute violence is the "possibility of a 'new humanity'", then 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.⁷³⁵

The inverted commas around 'positive' in this quote indicate how such a new inscription of humanity is already uncannily troubled by political incorrectness, resulting from an absolute, postcolonising violence that reaches beyond controlled instrumentality towards an unforeseeable and therefore fearsome outcome. This is obviously an estranging cultural space where Mudrooroo, the renegade Aboriginal author, would be able to find an uncanny home.

4.4. Black Man Unburdened?

Mudrooroo's Tasmanian quintet follows a development in characterisation and plot that closely aligns with developments in Australian multiculturalism and the location of Indigeneity within Australianness as of the early 1980s. In *Dr Wooreddy's Prescription for the Ending of the World* and *Master of the Ghost Dreaming*, Mudrooroo mobilizes Gothic and Magic Realist elements to fashion and coin Maban Reality, a literary genre which I take as his version of Postcolonising Dreaming Narrative. Maban Reality's agenda allows him to move from a defeatist to a more celebratory projection of Aboriginal survival under White civilization. Significantly, its development is on a par with the changing climate from assimilationist policies towards the recognition of Native Title and Aborigine-inclusive multiculturalism under successive progressive Australian governments up until the mid 1990s. The vampire trilogy, however, moves beyond the dialectic reversal of power structures tentatively given shape in *Wooreddy* and more decidedly in *Master* so as to announce the end of all civilisation through a full-fledged, gory inscription into the vampire Gothic. Thus, it reflects the heavy impact of a decade-

⁷³⁵ Turcotte 2005: 110.

long conservative backlash on Indigenous rights captained by three successive Howard governments, responsible for fuelling a heated debate on the place of Aboriginality within Australia and Australianness. At the core of his controversy was the issue of authenticity and Mudrooroo's identity plight in particular. As a former exponent of Aboriginal studies, well-known 'Indigenous' writer and 'authentic' victim of this debate, in the trilogy Mudrooroo offers tantalizing readings of both the public and private state of Indigeneity, developing the series' de(con)structive potential to its fullest, nihilist thrust.

Not surprisingly, Mudrooroo's vampiress exists in a non-signifying space, representing colonizer and colonized alike and refusing the more Manichean reversals of race, gender and class notions proposed in *Wooreddy* and *Master*. What is more, Amelia imbues the concept of hybridity with a new meaning in which Mudrooroo's own uncanny, elusive status may exist. Indeed, while participating in the Australian race debate through the character of Wadawaka, the black author also conflates with the White vampires, and vampirises her in turn to suit his own needs—in a way, this is enacted by Wadawaka and Amelia's merging at the end of the vampire set. Thus, Wendy Pearson understands the *Master* series—and one may add: *Wooreddy*—as a reflection of Mudrooroo's changing identities: a continuous series of reinventions that refuse a reading as a "totalizing whole."⁷³⁶ Similarly, regarding the vampire trilogy Gerry Turcotte reaches the conclusion that "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, and surely still a work in progress."⁷³⁷

Now, almost a decade after the last of the trilogy came to light, Turcotte's prediction may sound too optimistic. Mudrooroo, once a prolific author, has published little since his 'voluntary' exile from Australia; besides working on his autobiography, significantly entitled *Not My Place?*, his own webpage only mentions the novel *The Survivalists* (Imprint 2003), to which only summary references are to be found. He appeared to have exchanged one promised land (Australia) for another (Nepal) but forever an unfixed "nomad,"⁷³⁸ he has allegedly re-surfaced 'in retirement' in Northern Queensland. Nevertheless, his public silence also feels intentional and may ironically play on his proverbial elusiveness. In a way, the immortality of the elusive, haunting vampire is projected onto his literary corpus, which may speak for the writer when he has

⁷³⁶ Pearson 2003: 198-9.

⁷³⁷ Turcotte 2005: 115.

⁷³⁸ Mudrooroo 2003.

largely vanished from the Australian landscape.⁷³⁹ His physical body expelled to the geographical margins of Australia, Mudrooroo's spectre uncannily continues to exist within the liminality of Australian race discourse. Contradictory as this may seem, it is in refusing to engage in the public uproar about his and other authenticity cases that the author is most absent and yet present—the artist-critic cum political activist has become an immortal non-being who haunts and unsettles the limits of the identity debate.

By gothicising Postcolonising Dreaming Narrative through the White vampiress and letting her speak for her/himself, Mudrooroo makes a strong case against 'authenticity' and cuts across the race, class and gender boundaries through which master narratives are inscribed and validated. Adam Shoemaker warns against the dangers of bio-genetic binaries as a means of mainstream control over minorities. He quotes Victor Hart, who maintains that the label of (Aboriginal) authenticity "defin[es] art in such a way that its delivery of cultural sustenance becomes commodified," concluding not to believe that "authenticity exists as Aboriginality; if anything, it exists as a process."⁷⁴⁰ The latter would indeed do justice to Mudrooroo's floating identity as a person *and* author "whose 'mongrel' signatures exude ambiguity ... as they show the scars of the multiple identifications which have made them so *productively impure*.⁷⁴¹" Leaving the stifling reductiveness of the paternal question aside, it is through his fiction that one may intend to understand Mudrooroo and liberate the author from his burden of representation. Un/mastering Mudrooroo can be achieved through his fiction alone, which can be seen to operate in a terrain of productive promiscuity that, despite the author's troubled relationship with race and gender, necessarily reconfigures these as it un/masters colonial discourse.

The Mudrooroo Affair shows how a strict policing of identity politics—both at his own and others' hands—ultimately delivers adverse results. Mudrooroo's earlier fictional oeuvre expresses how and why race binaries should be avoided but still comes short of productively blurring gender categories, which has backfired on the goodwill he could have enjoyed in his own identity plight. In his theoretical work, he repeats this shortcoming: caught in the midst of his identity 'scandal', he held that the existential conditions of Aboriginal identity "needed to be addressed and perhaps from a *class*

⁷³⁹ Cf. Pearson 2003: 200.

⁷⁴⁰ Quoted in Shoemaker 2003: 18. The Label of Authenticity is a government initiative to guarantee that products commercialised 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 (2003: 15-7).

⁷⁴¹ Oboe 2003: xvii (my emphasis).

perspective,”⁷⁴² a concern which one *can* find reflected in his fiction. But even a supportive critic like Gerry Turcotte lays bare the misogyny that informs Mudrooroo’s relegation of Trucaninni in favour of her husband in *Wooreddy* and—to a lesser extent—in *Master*:

Where Mudrooroo ‘fails’ to account for the power of Aboriginal women, or to overturn traditional patriarchal accounts of women (something which he struggles to overcome in *Master of the Ghost Dreaming*), he nevertheless effectively and aggressively rewrites the white historical account of Aborigines as failed or inefficient warriors.⁷⁴³

It should perhaps come as no surprise that in a recent article bearing the significant title ‘Unmasking Mudrooroo’, the female Australian scholar Maureen Clark first defines the misogyny in Mudrooroo’s work as the impediment to a more tolerant and constructive view of identity, and then wields a full-fledged attack on the author by highlighting the surprisingly uncanny connections between George Augustus Robinson’s and the author’s life, postulating that “[t]he question we need to ask here, is whether or not, like Robinson, Mudrooroo is similarly guilty of an imposture, however well-meant it may have been.” Her answer is symptomatic of the loss of credit suffered by the author in progressive circles of Australian readership:

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

⁷⁴² Mudrooroo 1997b: 267 (my emphasis).

⁷⁴³ Turcotte 2003: 138.

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.⁷⁴⁴

The crux of this analysis obviously lies in the words “consciously appropriated,” which suggest an self-interested intentionality that uncannily aligns with conservative mainstream criticism of Mudrooroo, but which other befriended male critics such as the Aboriginal writer, actor and activist Gary Foley⁷⁴⁵ and non-Indigenous scholar Adam Shoemaker have found hard to validate. More objective female scholarship seems to agree with these male peers. In a review of Maureen Clark’s article, the Australian specialist in Women’s Studies Denise Cuthbert concludes that:

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.⁷⁴⁶

Neither the total absence of a politics of the body is effective in producing dynamic, postcolonising readings of identity within a cultural context of subjacent race, gender and class binaries, nor is essentialist criticism, whether of race, gender or class content. With the vampire trilogy, Mudrooroo has attempted to articulate an answer to this apparent deadlock; through the creation of a powerful, sexually, racially and socially ambiguous figure, his own ‘corpo/reality’ may be re-articulated in the Australian land and text-scape. As Gerry Turcotte argues, “However Mudrooroo’s fraught identity is read, the vampire trilogy offers a remarkable opportunity for Mudrooroo to script yet another potential space for himself to inhabit, via the figure of the vampire hybrid, the

⁷⁴⁴ Clarke 2001: 59 (my emphasis).

⁷⁴⁵ 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.

⁷⁴⁶ Cuthbert 2003: 228. In: Cuthbert, Denise, Cheryl Earnshaw, Susan Lowish, Stephen Pritchard, Ceridwen Spark. “Aboriginal Identity, Culture and Art.” *The Year’s Work in Critical & Cultural Theory*

model of undecidability and disruption.”⁷⁴⁷ Indeed, Mudrooroo’s position on the Australian firmament uncannily matches that of Amelia’s un-dead haunting. In his long absence—he lived in the Indian subcontinent for eight years before his recent return—he has been ominously present in the identity debate. In his silence—*The Promised Land* was his last important work of fiction—he has been strangely eloquent on his perception of the state of Aboriginality in the new millennium.

On the last pages of his vampire trilogy, the key to Indigenous survival, the hybrid vampire George is subordinated to the complex but potentially (re)productive relationship of the African slave cum freedom fighter Wadawaka and the English lady cum vampiress Amelia. The particulars of this triangle could be taken as Mudrooroo’s reckoning with his Aboriginal detractors and Australian Indigeneity at large. It also constitutes his novelistic self-justification against a rejection based on notions of blood; his attempt to maintain some hold on Australian soil by conceptualising a form of ‘Black Dreaming’ and ‘Black Title’; and his way of configuring a new Australian identity beyond existing binaries into which he may inscribe himself.

It should be clear from the above that Mudrooroo represents the uncanny turned flesh, a defamiliarising corpo/reality that may perhaps never be comfortably settled on Australia’s identitarian battlefield. What Turcotte identifies as one of the Gothic’s defining characteristics, “promiscuous changeability,”⁷⁴⁸ is as easily applicable to the author’s fiction as to his identity. The issue of promiscuity is always uneasily enmeshed in notions of legitimacy, as it juxtaposes maternal productiveness to paternal authority and cuts across to race and class. Promiscuity traps both Mudrooroo’s fiction and corpo/reality in an uncanny contradiction; for all the misogyny his vampiric rewritings of himself and his fiction may be seen to exude, they also constitute a vexed and desperate inscription into the feminine. Their ‘politically-incorrect’ impurities are productive in that they steer the identity debate away from the issue of authenticity towards articulation, performance and lived experience, unsettling determinist notions of race, gender and class. Thus, Mudrooroo’s fiction words the common sense notion that in order to be free, one has to overcome one’s fears; ironically, that which is most monstrously and frightfully scripted in his novels—the feminine—may willy-nilly most liberate the author and his political agenda.

⁷⁴⁷ Turcotte 2005: 114.

⁷⁴⁸ Turcotte 2005: 115.

The tensions his Gothic re-inscriptions of contemporary race, gender and class issues provoke are emblematic for the uncanny predicament Australia finds itself in, in which subject positions are both in and out of place, never fully reconciled. Thus, considering Mudrooroo an *intentional* fraud⁷⁴⁹ may uncannily align conservative and progressive positions in a defence of the reductive binaries that for so long have underpinned the Australian identity debate. Applying Wendy Pearson's argument on Mudrooroo's vampiric fiction to his status as a writer and person, one may claim that "[t]he possibility of reconciliation hinges on the larger resolution of society's desperate commitment to the very ideological binarisms that the immortal figure brings into question."⁷⁵⁰ Evidently, understanding and liberating Mudrooroo from the 'burden of representation' requires un/mastering the race, gender class discourses that subject his haunted, uncanny identity. Suggestions from Aboriginal and feminist interest groups to disavow or even destroy Mudrooroo's oeuvre⁷⁵¹ could be understood in terms of a stifling zeal of political correctness, and feel unproductive in overcoming essentialist binaries. Little will be gained by applying to Mudrooroo's hybrid inscriptions the same reductive terms of racial, social and paternal legitimacy as the author wielded against Sally Morgan's person, work and agenda—no matter how justified this may seem from a victim's perspective.

On the other hand, flexibility and openness should not be at odds with effective political engagement. Thus, one may wonder what kind of Australian corpo/reality the author eventually proposes for Indigeneity and Australianness in his gory Gothic version of Postcolonising Dreaming Narrative, which develops Fanon's 'absolute violence of decolonisation.' Although his fictional project speaks out against essentialism, its nihilistic, vampiric inscription into non-signification seems hardly compatible with the instrumental dialectics of decolonisation that inform an effective politics of the Aboriginal body within a mainstream politico-legal framework that retains essentialist notions. Thus, a *strategic* notion of Aboriginal identity politics tends to insist upon at least 'one drop of Aboriginal blood' in order to verify Indigenous corpo/reality. Mudrooroo participates in this discourse from a vampiric non-location in his need to prove an Indigenous bloodline. As long as the author cannot authenticate his genetic connection to Aboriginality, his Indigeneity is suspended in the eyes of many. Although Mudrooroo's fiction anxiously

⁷⁴⁹ See for instance Clark 2001 and 2006.

⁷⁵⁰ Pearson 2003: 200.

⁷⁵¹ See Turcotte 2005: 114-5 and Pearson 2003: 200. Apparently the Dumbartung organisation of the Nyoongar mob, whose kinship Mudrooroo has claimed, supports this proposal (Shoemaker 2003: 4).

demands the dissolution of constricting race, gender and class binaries, it cannot escape from the material bases that call them into being. Not only in the author's plight may the troubling evidence of this be found, but also in the sustained anger of the revelatory closing scene of his vampire trilogy. Amelia and Wadawaka's union is both a new beginning for Australia and a redemptive wish-fulfilment that writes Indigeneity into canine obedience.

What should emerge from the previous discussion is that, if some measure of essentialism is retained in the way many Australian Indigenes define themselves, this may well be understood as the uncanny result of a strategic application of emancipatory identity politics in response to the constraining parameters of mainstream politics and legislation. Mudrooroo has evidently suffered the unfortunate consequences of these dialectics and been moved to, if not beyond the limits of Australian Indigeneity. It remains to be seen when and how an end to his ostracisation may be found, as his long exile and retirement from active political and artistic engagement attest. Will an enabling configuration of his identity be constituted beyond Australian Indigeneity, and shall such a truly postcolonial corpo/reality configure Fanon's "new human"?⁷⁵² If so, these are tasks that will take considerable time and effort, and their execution depends on more factors than the postcolonising Maban powers of Mudrooroo's fictional imagination alone. Meanwhile, this self-proclaimed "global nomad"⁷⁵³ keeps performing his uncanny factual and fictional corpo/reality from a liminal location in the identity debate. A "blackfella masquerading as a blackfella,"⁷⁵⁴ he remains caught in a limbo between haunting and haunted notions of the (Ab)original and fraud.

⁷⁵² Kawash 1999: 255-6.

⁷⁵³ Mudrooroo 2003.

⁷⁵⁴ Quoted in Shoemaker 2003: 19, from a personal interview with the author.

Chapter 5

Kim Scott's 'Storying': Plotting 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"

(Kim Scott on True Country, quoted in Guy 1994: 11)

5.1. Kim Scott, 'The First White Man Born'

The matter of authenticity has been disturbingly present in Aboriginal identity but, as so often in postcolonial Australia, the edges of Native typicality remain fuzzy in a wide variety of cultural expressions. In the realm of Australian Letters, Aboriginal 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 Aboriginal and fuelling their public debate. In many ways, the Western Australian writer Kim Scott⁷⁵⁵ is another case of idiosyncratic Aboriginality, which he openly vaunts to break down static, engrained definitions of Indigeneity. Thus, he aims to accommodate a vast array of Australians who would not easily be considered Aboriginal on the authenticity count:

I make myself vulnerable and open to rejection. I'm not a traditional man, I'm disconnected from all sorts of traditional practices, I don't live on my traditional country—and there are lots of people like that ... I believe that politically, we need to promote pluralities and diverse ways of being Aboriginal. Like—what about the man who writes literary novels? You're an *anomaly*, because of our damaged history, but that's who you are.⁷⁵⁶

His own "damaged history" ambivalently locates him as a "quite White" suburban professional, whose life experience is not typically Indigenous. As he says, "as an

⁷⁵⁵ Incidentally, Scott was sent to school in Narrogin, Mudrooroo's place of birth (Kunhikrishnan 2003), and, like Sally Morgan, he has been living in a suburb of Perth (Scott 1993: 4).

⁷⁵⁶ Scott 2000 (my emphasis).

individual I don't share 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."⁷⁵⁷ This notwithstanding, he has managed to firmly anchor himself to an Aboriginal identity through his literary work and personal commitment with the Native cause from an uncanny, liminal location which defies Manichean understandings of Indigeneity.⁷⁵⁸ On the one hand, this is made possible by the modesty and humility with which he envisages his literary project, which—unlike Mudrooroo's—is never conceived of as normative. Aware of his idiosyncratic position in Australian society, Scott does not "like the idea of speaking for anyone else,"⁷⁵⁹ and specifies that:

I don't wish to be seen as a spokesperson. One of the reasons I express my biographical note [in my novels] in terms of 'one among those who call themselves Nyoongar' is to stress that I am in many ways dependent upon that community, and to locate authority in that community rather than in myself as an individual.⁷⁶⁰

On the other hand, while his Native ancestry is not spelt out on his body, turning him into a "White" Aborigine of sorts,⁷⁶¹ the Native line through his paternal grandmother was never hidden to him by his father but rather highlighted as something to be proud of:

... what I inherited ... when I was a little kid my dad would say to me, and it sounds a bit racist in its own way, "You're Aboriginal." Sometimes he would say, "You've got Aboriginal in you." Which sounds crude I suppose. And he would say, "And that's the best part of you." But that's about all he could say ... And it was a sort of, yeah, sullen resentment, an inarticulate pride that he was trying to hand on to me.⁷⁶²

⁷⁵⁷ Kunhikrishnan 2003b.

⁷⁵⁸ For the concept of liminality, see chapter 2, p. 44 and further.

⁷⁵⁹ Guy 1996: 14.

⁷⁶⁰ Kunhikrishnan 2003b.

⁷⁶¹ 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" (Scott 2000).

⁷⁶² Buck 2001.

So although he “grew up thinking of himself as ‘of Aboriginal descent’,” Scott considers this “a weak way to define [him]self,”⁷⁶³ and has been clearly riddled by the silences and gaps in his Aboriginal heritage. Thus, he uses his literary work as the primary means to trace, plot and flesh these out. While he ambiguously wonders whether his writing is “revealing [his] Aboriginality, or revealing the absence of it,”⁷⁶⁴ his father’s oral testimony to his biological and cultural roots places him in a more advantageous, ‘authenticated’ position than Sally Morgan, who has had to struggle with her unclear ancestry, or Mudrooroo, whose grappling with his biological origins has been radically counterproductive. All three writers are instances of the uncanny turned flesh, but in Scott’s case this is because a Native identity is ‘hiding’ under 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 modelled on Scott’s personal experience, and proffered as a fictional model from which to investigate the author’s uncanny hybrid identity:

This is what I tried to do with that book. Harley is an anomaly or something of a curiosity even for his own people and that is a position that I inhabit in my own life in many ways. It’s like ‘he’s one of us, but he’s different from us.’ It is an anomalous historical position to be in. But [writing] is a useful job to be doing. Promoting a sense of diversity and escaping the constraints that so many of us have been put into because of the oppression of our history ... Offer[ing] some more space into which people can move.⁷⁶⁵

Homi Bhabha’s work on colonial mimicry may be adapted to Kim Scott’s postcolonising positioning. Scott is inscribed into the “‘not quite/not white’ [space] on the margins of metropolitan desire” whose “erratic eccentric, accidental *objets trouvés* of the colonial discourse” defy “the *founding objects* of the Western world.”⁷⁶⁶ Thus, these *objets trouvés* turn into what one might call the ‘founding subjects of the postcolonial locale’. An *objet trouvé* or “found object” is a “natural object or an artifact not originally intended as art, found and considered to have aesthetic value.”⁷⁶⁷ Scott may be

⁷⁶³ Scott 2000.

⁷⁶⁴ Fielder 2006: 2.

⁷⁶⁵ Buck 2001.

⁷⁶⁶ Bhabha 1994: 92.

⁷⁶⁷ See Works Cited: “found object”.

understood to turn his own identity, a cultural artefact of sorts, into an *objet trouvé* by way of his literary output, and to employ it strategically so as to denounce the impact and damage of assimilationist policies on Australia's Aborigines. Arguably, this *objet trouvé* plays a role in the process of Reconciliation by configuring a postcolonising, inclusive conception of Australian identity, which Scott sees riddled by "the fear and psychosis that is in mainstream Australia."⁷⁶⁸ As such, Scott's found object (personal identity) rewrites itself into a *founding subject* (book) of postcolonial identity formation in Australia.

Indeed, Scott's work has been praised by both the Aboriginal and mainstream communities, who recognise the artistic and political merits and implications of his literary efforts. Notably, in 2000 Scott was the first Aboriginal author ever to win the prestigious Miles Franklin Award for his novel *Benang*,⁷⁶⁹ but the author likes to highlight that:

... one of the things that Noongyars [*sic*] seem to like even without reading it is that [*Benang*] promotes talk about our shared history to do with injustice, that genocidal thing: that kids were taken away just to eradicate their sense of themselves as Aboriginal. So the book seems to work, and I am not sure about this either, as a sort of *object* rather than something you read!⁷⁷⁰

Relatively untouched by personal controversy and couched by the Native community's support, Scott's intent to address the (re)configuration of Aboriginality and Australianness meets with less resistance and doubt than the work of his literary predecessors dealt with in this dissertation, who, for better or for worse, laid so much of the ground for other Native writers to occupy. In this respect Eleanor Hogan holds that:

In representing the histories of subjects of assimilationist policies, life narratives by writers who are 'young, gifted and not very black' like Scott and Morgan contribute significantly to a contemporary, hybrid articulation of Aboriginality, exposing experiences of cultural difference which a more purist approach such as Mudrooroo's *Writing from the Fringe* could work to

⁷⁶⁸ Buck 2001.

⁷⁶⁹ He shared the award with the mainstream author Thea Astley for her novel *Drylands* (1999).

⁷⁷⁰ Buck 2001 (my emphasis).

suppress ... They contribute to the relocation of Aboriginality from a site of repression and secrecy to one of public exchange.⁷⁷¹

Whereas Sally Morgan's hybrid inscription of Aboriginality has nevertheless been polemic,⁷⁷² Kim Scott's carefully self-reflexive art more successfully configures an embracing sense of subjectivity within the possibilities of a strategic employment of identity—Scott's "own position is that once that Aboriginality is expressed you can be inclusive."⁷⁷³ To use Homi Bhabha's words again, Scott's work may be seen to circulate publicly as a token of "strange cultural survival"⁷⁷⁴ within the historical, linguistic, racial and gendered liminalities of the Australian land and text-scape; as such, it is instrumental in confronting Australians with a silenced, unprocessed past but also forges a notion of solidarity amongst them. Scott explains this uncanny, postcolonising agenda of reconciliation-through-confrontation as follows:

... I think what's required is non-Aboriginal Australia looking to itself[,] what its relationship to Aboriginal Australia tells it about itself[:] ... a sort of psychosis ... [T]he business of being protector of Aboriginal people, that notion, and the falsity and the self-deception in that is part of it. So yeah thinking, reflecting upon ones [*sic*] own ... upon the nature of mainstream Australia's psyche in terms of its relationship with Aboriginal Australia is an important part of reconciliation. That gets shied away from a lot.⁷⁷⁵

Yet, he insists on "[w]hat I believe is the great strength about the Nyoongar community ... and other Aboriginal communities[:] ... compassion, spiritual generosity, bravery and inclusiveness. So in being confrontational I still want to hold on to those values."⁷⁷⁶ Not surprisingly, in such a project he understands "the return and consolidation to the Nyoongar community of what should be our cultural heritage as a priority."⁷⁷⁷

In line with such a recovery, Scott has managed to trace his Native origins to the land on Western Australia's south coast, and has been accepted into its local Nyoongar

⁷⁷¹ Hogan 1998: 99-100.

⁷⁷² See chapter 3.

⁷⁷³ Scott 2000.

⁷⁷⁴ Bhabha 1990b: 320.

⁷⁷⁵ Buck 2001.

⁷⁷⁶ Buck 2001.

⁷⁷⁷ Kunhikrishnan 2003a.

mob. This is reflected in and given shape through his writing, which becomes increasingly autobiographical in tone, focus and localisation; 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"⁷⁷⁸ of fiction loosely inspired in his teaching experience in the Kimberley; it addresses the politics of identity formation by using a polyphonic narrative perspective which interrogates the genre of Aboriginal life-writing, Western auto/biography and the realist novel. His second novel, *Benang* (1999), investigates, fictionalises and re-assesses his family history by critically reworking "the hostile nature" of archival material from the assimilationist period and "[u]s[ing] it[s language] back on itself."⁷⁷⁹ *Benang* also works with multiple shifts of perspective and polyphony, but adds fragmentary and nonlinear story-telling techniques as narrative devices as well, equally breaking away from realist formulations of the autobiography and novel.

His third publication, *Kayang and Me* (2005), situates itself in the realm of non-fiction and represents an important parenthesis in his novelistic production which has put his projected third novel, *Naatj*, "on the backburner."⁷⁸⁰ The reason for this excursion into non-fiction is easily understood as the ongoing need for Scott to "explor[e his own] sense of place, more specifically, of the South-West of Western Australia—Noongar country," to which his extended family belongs. Scott feels that "[h]olding the tension [in this search] 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."⁷⁸¹ Thus, Scott's third longer prose project, a joint narrative with a Native elder/aunt of his, veers away from fiction to bear critically on local fact as recorded by the Indigenous oral tradition as well as Western written sources. It poises the family stories and personal recollections of his Aboriginal relative and elder, Hazel Brown, against a larger framework of reflections within a socio-political and historic context elaborated from personal memories and archival material by Scott himself. As such, it plots a productive dialogue revising the mainstream's rendering of local history from an Aboriginal perspective, and constitutes a local micro-narrative that unmasks the uncanny gaps and silences in Western "metanarrative" or "grand

⁷⁷⁸ Rai 2007: 43.

⁷⁷⁹ Scott quoted in Fielder 2006.

⁷⁸⁰ Fielder 2006: 8.

⁷⁸¹ Fielder 2006: 8.

narrative”.⁷⁸² This development in Scott’s writing delivers an interesting contrast to Mudrooroo’s work, whose identity plight forces him to write himself increasingly out of Australia, locating his ‘promised land’ elsewhere, while it revives and elaborates on Sally Morgan’s lifewriting under conditions of a meta-fictional and deconstructionist kind.

Scott speaks of his writing as “storying” in an effort to express this sense of experimentation. It is undoubtedly a literary reconfiguration of the Aboriginal oral story-telling tradition, known as ‘yarning’ to mainstreamers,⁷⁸³ that reworks the parameters of mainstream genres and develops into Scott’s version of Postcolonising Dreaming Narrative:

In Noongyar [*sic*] there is a different way of thinking that is available to address continuity and cultural change ... but I do not regard myself an expert in those. My connections to my own tradition in that sense are not as strong as I would like them to be. 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 ...⁷⁸⁴

Thus, his experimentation responds to a postcolonising agenda, as it reflects Scott’s critical stance towards the politics of Australian identity, art and culture. As he says, “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.”⁷⁸⁵ So on a deeper level, “Scott regards his writing as an exploration of the dominant white culture’s psyche in Australia—a psyche he describes as troubled, unstable, ambivalent.”⁷⁸⁶

In order to reach this uncanny core of the national consciousness and breathe life into the ‘dead heart’ of Australian identity, his exploration does not only take place in terms of content but also form; thus, it plots ways to confront the problem of “White

⁷⁸² Lyotard 1984: xxiii-iv.

⁷⁸³ Buck 2001. According to *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition* (Houghton Mifflin Company 2004), in informal English, a yarn is a “long, often elaborate narrative of real or fictitious adventures; an entertaining tale.” Amongst Aborigines, the oral story-telling tradition is often referred to as ‘yarning’ but incorporates the Dreaming and as such goes beyond the fictitious and entertaining. See for instance Mudrooroo 1997a: chapter 6.

⁷⁸⁴ Buck 2001 (my emphasis).

⁷⁸⁵ Buck 2001.

⁷⁸⁶ Fielder 2006: 5.

Forms, Aboriginal Content” addressed by Mudrooroo and others.⁷⁸⁷ Therefore, his fiction may be felt to be estranging, producing uncanny effects on the mainstream reader. As the Indigenous critic Philip Morrissey holds:

The respectful but sometimes puzzled reception of *Benang* indicates that the challenge to Aboriginal writing at the present moment lies in the type of reader waiting to receive the book ... The dominant mode of reading has continued to be one of empathy and identification, but the critical challenge for Aboriginal writers 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*.⁷⁸⁸

As my main concern throughout this dissertation is with prose fiction, the following will concentrate on his two novels published up to date, *True Country* and *Benang*, in which—to follow Freud’s analysis—such literary experimentation within the uncanny is at its greatest.

5.2. Tracing One’s Way to True Country: the Outback as the Country of the Heart

Kim Scott’s first novel, *True Country*, first published in 1993, is born out 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.”⁷⁸⁹ In many ways, this “unconventional life narrative”⁷⁹⁰ reflects the writer’s confrontation with the blank/white page, an identitarian *tabula rasa* of sorts,⁷⁹¹ and his struggle to chart it with the dark traces of an Indigenous belonging. Scott’s novel reflects a personal journey of discovery and recovery—a journey “out/back” as Penny van Toorn aptly puts it⁷⁹²—that aims to re-script the fiction of the Australian *Terra Nullius* as a *Terra Ab/originalis*.

⁷⁸⁷ Van Toorn 1994: 46. She refers to an article under the same title published by Mudrooroo in *Aboriginal Writing Today* (Jack Davis & Bob Hodge (Eds.). Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press 21-33).

⁷⁸⁸ Morrissey 2000: 320.

⁷⁸⁹ Scott 2007: 2.

⁷⁹⁰ Hogan 1998: 98.

⁷⁹¹ *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 works cited: “tabula rasa”).

⁷⁹² Van Toorn 1994: 39-40.

Thus, the text may productively feed back into the issues of hybrid identity, Aboriginality and Australianness, which Scott words as follows in the Author's Note to the novel:

This novel began with a desire to explore a sort of *neglected interior space*, and to consider my own heritage. Having turned my attention to that primarily personal territory, and the *blank page*, I selected some words and images from my little store and scattered them before me. Here, I hoped might be some place from which to begin ... I used details of Kimberley topography, and borrowed from the dialect and past of one community I had lived in ... Karnama could ... be one of many Aboriginal communities in Northern Australia.⁷⁹³

In order to map out this “neglected interior space” and turn it into a true country of the heart, Scott's subject of exploration, Billy Storey, travels to the isolated margins of Australia. There, pristine remnants of traditional Aboriginal culture are expected to endure but ambiguously shift between notions of a Native Eden and Hell. Nevertheless, it is in the tension between the remnants of an untouched, romanticised past and an overbearing modernity contaminated by the capitalist production mode and church and ‘welfare’ state policing that Aboriginal culture shows its uncanny capacity for adaptation and survival. The North-Western Australian outback constitutes the geographical configuration of Homi Bhabha's liminal space from which national identities may be rewritten; thus, the Kimberley is the ‘un-dead’ Native heart of the country that may feed the necessary life blood to Billy Storey's unfinished sense of self. Interestingly, Billy's quest turns into a wish-fulfilment that would not be readily applicable to Scott's own life:

Names plucked from a family tree and the knowledge that my father had attended a particular mission school led me to a remote Aboriginal community with which the mission was associated. I applied to be a teacher at the government school there, hoping to connect with Indigenous family with roots in country and community. *I was not successful*. The name was coincidental, but 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

⁷⁹³ Scott 1993: 8 (my emphasis). Further references to *My Country* in section 2 by page numbers only.

“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.⁷⁹⁴

So, whereas Scott’s own genealogical quest into the outback initially sets him out on the wrong track and further ‘backs him out of place’, this dissatisfaction does provide the dramatic tension—the “chasm”—from which he is able to plot a true country of the heart for his fictional persona and himself; here both may come into (Native) knowledge, and here both may successfully inscribe a new sense of identity.⁷⁹⁵ Thus, Scott’s *True Country* is the result of charting the empty white page with hybrid scribbles from the perspective of acculturation, inscribing it in the nature versus nurture debate. One way of seeing this is through the *tabula-rasa* concept, which primes cultural over biological acquisition in the formation of one’s personality, emotional and social behaviour and intelligence. Thus, while being riddled by his biological origins, Scott stated after the publication of *True Country* how the novel had helped him to establish a sense of identity: “I think a lot of it, throughout the book, is about *nurture*. Nurture through story.

⁷⁹⁴ Scott & Brown: 16-7 (my emphasis). Similarly, in *True Country* Billy comments that his father went to New Norcia mission school, 132 km north of Perth (Scott 1993: 221). As their webpage explains, the monastic town of New Norcia was founded in 1846 by two Spanish Benedictine priests, Bishop Rosendo Salvado and Dom Josep Serra, the latter of whom was born in Mataró, near Barcelona. Both maintained contact with Catalan priests (see <http://www.newnorcia.wa.edu.au>). *Midnight Oil* is an Australian rock band famous for the political relevance of their lyrics and commitment to the Aboriginal cause. *Midnight Oil* have been active for almost four decades, although intermittently after their charismatic vocalist Peter Garrett embarked on a political career in 2002. He won a seat for the Australian Labor Party in 2004, was their Shadow Minister for Climate Change, Environment, Heritage and Arts, and was named their Minister for Environment, Heritage and Arts by the Prime Minister elect, Kevin Rudd, in 2007. The lyrics of their song “The Dead Heart,” published in the year of the Bicentennial, go:

We don’t serve your country / Don’t serve your king / Know your custom don’t speak your tongue /
White man came took everyone
We don’t serve your country / Don’t serve your king / White man listen to the songs we sing /
White man came took everything
We carry in our hearts the true country / And that cannot be stolen / We follow in the steps of our
ancestry / And that cannot be broken
We don’t need protection / Don’t need your land / Keep your promise on where we stand / We will
listen well understand
Mining companies, pastoral companies / Uranium companies / Collected companies / Got more right
than people / Got more say than people / Forty thousand years can make a difference to the state
of things / *The dead heart lives here* (my emphasis)

⁷⁹⁵ 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.

If you believe it, and talk it, then it becomes real.”⁷⁹⁶ However, Billy goes through a process of *re*-acculturation, which also allows interpreting *True Country* as a *palimpsest* narrative, and this would prime nature over nurture, that is, the recovery of Indigenous roots over mainstream education. Thus, the novel would evince itself as the uncanny intent to turn the fiction of *Terra Nullius*, a *tabula-rasa* narrative imposed by White colonisation, on its head by “storying” whatever fragments remain of underlying *Terra Aboriginalis* into a place of emotional and physical belonging.⁷⁹⁷ Significantly, Scott believes that he “was trying to write in the *space* between the title and the affirmation” of Midnight Oil’s song,⁷⁹⁸ 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. Likewise, Penny Van Toorn points out that the novel puts into question:

... the boundaries conventionally separating disparate orders of truth, both within and between different cultures, partly because the story is based on Scott’s own teaching experience at the Kalamburu Benedictine Mission in the Kimberley ... 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.⁷⁹⁹

5.2.1. Storying and community building

Billy Storey forms part of the group of mainstream schoolteachers—aptly nicknamed “chalkies”⁸⁰⁰—that are employed at Karnama for the ‘social improvement’ of the Aboriginal community. But as Billy’s sense of self is in a flux, riddled as he is by “doubt ... about me, the past, what I’m doing, where I belong, the future...,”⁸⁰¹ his project at the mission settlement turns from teaching into learning. Indeed, it aims to bridge and close the gap between a Native and non-Native sense of understanding the world in a process

⁷⁹⁶ Guy 1994: 11 (my emphasis).

⁷⁹⁷ 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 Works Cited: “palimpsest”).

⁷⁹⁸ Buck 2001 (my emphasis).

⁷⁹⁹ Van Toorn 1994: 41-2.

⁸⁰⁰ 103. The epithet refers to the tool used in the transmission of Western knowledge as well as whiteness of skin and perceived mainstream identity. In Billy’s uncanny case, white chalk is used to write onto the black slate of his Aboriginal identity.

⁸⁰¹ 129.

which is far from unproblematic. In an uncanny mirror image of Scott himself, fictional Billy tries to write on the whitened/blank page of his identity with the dark traces of his (unidentified) local Indigenous forebears, gathering and adapting Native stories and reading them to his Aboriginal students. In this project, he is assisted by Fatima, an important mission elder, who assigns him the task of ‘storying’ the Native perceptions of local contact history:

... it should be like the way I say it in that [mission journal] ... I tell people, like I do now, to you, the right way it happened. The *true* way, and what we people think. You can do that too, maybe ... You can write what I say, what we say, all together ... So people will read it, and know.⁸⁰²

True Country in this sense foreshadows the work Scott would successfully carry out years later with his Native relative Hazel Brown in *Kayang and Me* (2005), at a much more settled stage of his own search for identity. Nevertheless, towards the end of *True Country* we read that, just as he is unable to tell/write his own story/Storey, Billy can’t make these tales to work in front of the classroom. Thus, he muses, “They don’t read well, not without a lot of editing ... It’s problematical, see. I write for the kids, but I edit. So, do I change it too much? Do I write only for the kids, here? Who speaks? Have I the right to....”⁸⁰³ Therefore, Eleanor Hogan sees Billy “enact[ing] some of the anxieties addressed recently 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.”⁸⁰⁴ However, Kim Scott’s novel, as a much-circulated and appreciated item of ‘strange cultural survival’ testifies to what extent the author has managed to intervene successfully in the issue of postcolonial identity formation.

The great merit of Kim Scott’s first novel lies precisely in Billy’s (and Kim’s) self-critical stance, which self-consciously addresses the conceptual problems of transferring the genres of the (auto)biography and the realist novel into Aboriginal ‘life-writing’. These cover questions such as: where do the borders between fact and fiction

⁸⁰² 43-4 (my emphasis).

⁸⁰³ 245.

⁸⁰⁴ Hogan 1998: 108.

lie; how can Western literary traditions deliver believable, ‘authentic’ Indigenous experience without uncannily calling into doubt the author’s Native identity; to what extent is a linear, realist auto/biographical mode appropriate to address the riddled issue of postmodern and postcolonial identity formation as it engages with a manifestly different world? Despite all its merits, *My Place* has been repeatedly attacked for fictionalising the constitution of Sally Morgan’s Indigenous identity as a process akin to a romantic *deus ex machine*. Contrary to her allegedly all too rash recovery of Indigenous roots on her nostalgic journey into the outback and subsequent quick retreat to suburbia, Kim Scott’s novel addresses this issue with considerably more subtlety, complexity and self-criticism.⁸⁰⁵

Notably, in order to create the necessary critical distance for identity formation to be addressed productively, Scott chooses a fictional protagonist for what has been described as his “interesting example of that most inward-looking and distinctive of European fictional modes, the *bildungsroman*.”⁸⁰⁶ Mudrooroo similarly comments on the genre of life-writing through the fictional character of George in his vampire trilogy, but identification between the author and the male protagonist hardly takes place—if anywhere, this should be sought in the Afro-Australian Wadawaka. Scott follows more closely in Sally Morgan’s footsteps when reworking his own experiences into text. But perhaps pressed by the relative unsuccessfulness of the first stages of his personal quest and the problems Morgan (and others) encountered in ‘authenticating’ her Aboriginal experience, his instance of life-writing is emphatically presented as novelistic invention. As it reads in the Author’s Note, “None of the events or situations in the narrative are intended to correspond to any real occurrence. And although in a few instances, aspects of certain actual events are suggested ... this work remains wholly fictional in every aspect.”⁸⁰⁷ Moreover, Scott assigns a decisive role to fiction in conveying his message: “I like to think that in writing fiction I get a chance to be more true than the truth.”⁸⁰⁸ The purported fictional distance to reality works to undercut the pitfalls of the authenticity debate that Sally Morgan’s Native auto/biography raised. This shifts the focus from an emphatic *My Place* or ‘My Quest’ to a speculative, communal *True Country* or Nation’s

⁸⁰⁵ 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 2007: 1-3).

⁸⁰⁶ Pascal 2004: 4.

⁸⁰⁷ 8.

⁸⁰⁸ Kunhikrishnan 2003.

Quest; as one commentator has it, “*True Country* strives to persuade its readers that a viable national community is possible.”⁸⁰⁹ Thus, the focus is no longer on how a not-so-black, suburban professional can (re)claim an Aboriginal heritage but, instead, on how “in the form of its telling, [the novel] suggests something of being claimed by a heritage.”⁸¹⁰ Thus, *True Country* highlights a collective perspective in which it is the land itself that speaks out through the text:

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.⁸¹¹

True Country therefore deals entirely with Billy’s destination: Karnama itself is the spiritual and emotional objective of his journey. It dedicates all its narrative space to assessing the factual situation of the Aboriginal community after the onslaught of past assimilationist policies and the persisting contemporary tutelage by church and state authorities despite Native “self-determination,”⁸¹² thus raising pressing questions as to what it means to be Aboriginal. The fixed geographical location of Karnama offers the possibility of investigating Aboriginality from a variety of perspectives, delivering a text with multiple, contrasting points of view. John Fielder sees *True Country* as an instance of *polyphony*, which Mikhael Bakhtin defined as “a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices.” Fielder holds that “in *True Country*, a multi-voiced narrative technique underlines the specificity of Scott’s story as one emergent Aboriginal voice amongst other Aboriginal voices.”⁸¹³ What may confound and estrange the reader from western genres, therefore, is the sudden, multiple shifts in narrative perspective ranging over grammatical person and

⁸⁰⁹ Pascal 2004: 6.

⁸¹⁰ Scott 2007: 3.

⁸¹¹ Morrissey 2000: 319.

⁸¹² 98.

⁸¹³ Fielder 2006: 1. Fielder quotes from Mikhail Bakhtin 1984: 6.

number, accompanied by shifts in register as well as sociolect. Going well beyond the more linear polyphonic inscription of custodianship in *My Place*, this asks readers to invest considerable intellectual and emotional effort in gathering meaning from the text. As a result, it keeps them on their toes as to the conflicting political agendas behind utterances, whose implications and validity have to be negotiated throughout the text.

The subversive character of Scott's textual 'plotting' is closely related to Mikhael Bakhtin's concept of *heteroglossia*. Heteroglossia is the net of social and discursive forces in which polyphony is embedded, and "comes as close as possible to conceptualizing a locus where the great centripetal and centrifugal forces that shape discourse can meaningfully come together."⁸¹⁴ Heteroglossia bears on the discursive quality of the construction of the self, and Bakhtin situates the tension between one's self-construction and existential position in the world at the intersection point where different societal discourses meet in the individual.⁸¹⁵ Obviously, Billy is struggling with conflictive discourses on Aboriginality so as to reach a satisfactory sense of self, still in the making. However, not only Billy but also the novel is a heteroglossic intersection point of Native and non-Native discourses, and, therefore, a postcolonising, performative text in progress. Thus, Scott writes in his Author's Note, "As I continued to write, the story developed in ways which I had not suspected."⁸¹⁶ Reflecting a country where racial difference continues to be discursively inscribed in all realms of society and Native and non-Native 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."⁸¹⁷ This negotiation goes beyond the incorporation of non-standard English/oral discourse into the novel—which would be tantamount to assimilation—but rather bears on a Native adaptation of the fictional mode. Such an adaptation primes the communal construction and reception of narrative through custodianship and the incorporation of the Aboriginal Sacred into Postcolonising Dreaming Narrative. 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

⁸¹⁴ Holquist 1990: 70.

⁸¹⁵ Bakhtin 1994: 345.

⁸¹⁶ 8.

⁸¹⁷ Pascal 2004: 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" (122).

common genres of Western writing and expectations towards the text's revelation of Western 'truth'.

While Billy is the purported protagonist of the novel, story-telling takes place from an oblique angle, in which different voices contribute to the telling, and assume authority in the delivery. This heteroglossia "decentr[es] ... Billy's subjectivity in order to represent other voices and other stories in *True Country* [and] instead facilitates an understanding of identity in terms of intersubjectivity and community."⁸¹⁸ Thus, an important role is played by the communal Aboriginal voice which "upsets the narrative mastery typically possessed by the Western autobiographical subject,"⁸¹⁹ and speaks from a transcendental, knowing subject position. Its transcription of Aboriginal English can tentatively be identified as the Indigenous elders', and offers Scott an alternative way of dealing with community—not as an:

... outback-frontier sort of thing ... [W]hen I was mucking round with the Aboriginal English it gave me a way out ... [I]t's not really Aboriginal English but it's got the elements of that in the rhythm. It offered a new opportunity of storying. The narrator was taken over by language and the stories available.⁸²⁰

The anonymous, mysterious Aboriginal voice is inserted in key episodes of the text and speaks with the force of the Indigenous Law of the Land. 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"⁸²¹ identity: "We're gonna make a story, true story. You might find it's here you belong. A place like this."⁸²² This process comes full circle in the "welcome to you" of its conclusion, which highlights the dynamic, performative 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

⁸¹⁸ Hogan 1998: 10.

⁸¹⁹ Hogan 1998: 5.

⁸²⁰ Guy 1996: 10.

⁸²¹ Van Toorn 1994: 47.

⁸²² 13-4.

new, little bit special, all the time.”⁸²³ For Billy, this coming into knowledge takes place through an epiphanic experience at the settlement’s river, to which the novel builds up slowly, casting his experiences and views against those of others.

Billy starts the exploration of his own neglected inner space as a “chalkie” (teacher) of the ‘White ways’ at an outpost of Western civilisation, but ends up learning about himself and the local Aboriginal community instead. Billy’s ‘out/back’ experience is certainly complex due to his hybrid nature: he actively tries to negotiate a shared space for the Native and non-Native world based on critical engagement and mutual respect. In Billy, the uncanny obtains as the manifestation of his hidden Aboriginal heritage, which slowly turns into a hybrid Aboriginal initiation ritual. Initially, Billy’s fit into the local environment is charted as a “typical story of white explorer narrative” as he, together with other, White suburban professionals, travels out from the relative security and familiarity of the White heart of Western Australia, Perth, into a “relatively dangerous, unknown liminal space.”⁸²⁴ As *True Country* shows, it is Karnama’s isolation that represents an uncanny, un-dead ‘heart of darkness’ to the Western mind. As such, it is presumed to beckon for White civilisation’s help after Christian and Enlightenment fashion, but also uncannily challenges mainstream understandings of Aboriginality, and hence, of Australianness. The alluring Aboriginal community ultimately proves elusive and beyond control, discouraging and scaring away most of the non-Natives employed by the church and state. For Westerners the uncanny obtains because they are irremediably biased and up against a situation beyond their understanding. They are ‘ghosted’⁸²⁵ by a Karnama they are unable to bend into a more acceptable, mainstream perception of home, and most of them are expelled by a situation outside of their control. Thus, the Aboriginal narrator concludes that “[s]ome of them see their world slipping slipping the longer they stay, and they struck out before they *marooned* and forgotten.”⁸²⁶ The verb ‘to maroon’, which means 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 17th and 18th centuries. These were obviously ‘*marron*’—dark brown, fugitive and wild respectively, as the French origin of the word indicates.⁸²⁷ Thus, the Aboriginal voice

⁸²³ 255.

⁸²⁴ Van Toorn 1994: 42.

⁸²⁵ I refer to Elizabeth Povinelli’s coining of ‘to ghost’ as a reference to the Aboriginal sign haunting the national self-definition and to the impossibility of its representation as a true essence (1998: 580).

⁸²⁶ 236 (*sic*; my emphasis).

⁸²⁷ See works cited: “maroon”.

would seem to suggest that Karnama's lack of 'civilisation' could corrupt the White people's 'stable' identities.

Multiple discursive strains 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 through the text. Non-Aboriginal voices in *True Country* are mainly imbued with liberal-humanist and/or romantic content. Their racism towards the Aboriginal underclass is barely hidden, and their purported effectiveness in terms of social reform questionable. Alex and Annette, the new school principals who came out with Billy and his wife, subscribe to a stereotypical mainstream view of the Natives as a dying race and are quickly disillusioned with the poor results of their efforts towards Indigenous 'improvement' through the promotion of Western forms of self-management. Typically, they believe that "[the Natives] need to organise themselves. Set some sort of goals. Face up to the way things have to be done nowadays. A management plan. And look after finances."⁸²⁸ They finally leave after the Aborigines have presumably set their dogs upon the school principals' son, as part of a territorial conflict with the mission involving the community's animals. White inability to understand Aboriginal sensitivities to cultural heritage, group dynamics and power structures underlies this episode, which echoes a much earlier one of dog-shooting by missionaries. Fatima's version of the latter incident shows it to be badly recorded in the mission journal, which highlights White civilisation's insistent inability and unwillingness to connect with and adapt to Native culture. Not surprisingly, perhaps, Billy initially feels 'dislocated' by and uncomfortable with the accuracy of Fatima's memory, which defies official records.⁸²⁹

The White project officer, who leaves the community due to the same territorial conflict, aims to reorganise the Aboriginal economy by imposing the capitalist production mode:

Gerrard told them of the plans he had for getting the community to begin operating small enterprises, so they wouldn't be relying on hand-outs. And they'd come to understand such things like reward for effort. 'But the problem is they get good money for doing nothing, so, you know, why bother?'⁸³⁰

⁸²⁸ 25.

⁸²⁹ 43.

⁸³⁰ 126.

Thus, the step to personal gain is easily taken. When presenting a “real world” scheme “for the community’s benefit”, he turns out to be self-serving and far from altruistic. The plan consists in hiring out his bus to the community so that tourist corroborees can be organised at the settlement rather than the beach, which obviously favours his private economy rather than the community’s. The deceptive, selfish logic behind this plan for collective improvement is laid bare by the Storeys’ observation that what the Natives have learnt quickest from White civilisation is “perks, privilege’ and ‘corruption.”⁸³¹ Gerrard’s project for self-enrichment is the cause for the tourist corroborees to result in an ‘authentic’ disaster. Not surprisingly, “Some of the tourists were shaking their heads in anger and disappointment”⁸³² at the bogus performances, despite the community’s reputation for having the best dancers in the region. The mediation of Indigenous culture through Western civilisation is further questioned through the traditional dances organized by the school: “One of the [Native] boys said, *mockingly*, ‘We should do it or we’ll lose our culture’.”⁸³³

Father Paul shows more sensitivity towards Native society in that his religious spirituality has been influenced by the close contact with the Natives, pointing towards New-Age hybridising:

I think God is changing ... Perhaps we need to think of Him as a great spirit, a creator spirit, an artist. A creative force behind the world, living in the world, and giving ceremony to the land ... Maybe they, we, will end up with a new God here, some sort of major spirit from the Dreaming or whatever, who named everything and us—or should I say the aborigines?—and created this special relationship. People, creation, the land.

Nevertheless, his disappointment with mission reality confirms the church’s traditional vision of the Natives as fallen away from God and Salvation. Thus, the priest summarises his loss of belief in Karnama as follows: “A microcosm of what? Our society? The whites here work hard. The Aborigines play cards, fight. What else? Incest, child molestation, violence, wife bashing. Alcoholism. Petrol sniffing. The church is dying ... Is this place

⁸³¹ 126-9.

⁸³² 217.

⁸³³ 21 (my emphasis).

real? ... When you're away you wonder if this place is *real*." The romantic gap between the ideal and the real in Father Paul's discourse is laid bare by the communal Aboriginal voice: "Oh, it need not be real. It is not this reality were homesick for." The latter confirms Billy's belief that "[p]eople are shrivelling in this hospitable land, within an inhospitable, wider society,"⁸³⁴ which shifts responsibilities for Native society's collapse to mainstream society. On the final count, mission reality bites, and perhaps indicative for his degree of disillusion, Father Paul leaves on an oxymoronic 'permanent sabbatical'.

Most Whites vaunt liberal humanist attitudes that are firmly inscribed in colonialist, paternalist and capitalist notions of progress; however Jasmine, the attractive single bookkeeper, offers a contrast in romanticizing the Noble Savage. As in answer to Father Paul's 'voice of experience', she ponders:

This was *real*. This was Australia, she thought. I am living a unique existence here, among these rocks and paintings, in this shade and breeze, beneath this sun. Aboriginal people. She hadn't really known Aboriginal people before she came here. Well, not real ones. Just some in towns mostly...⁸³⁵

Jasmine's essentialist discourse on authenticity eventually clashes with Indigenous reality: longing to bear a child, she attempts to bridge the racial gap making use of her womanly charms. Thus, she engages in an affair with a married Aborigine, Milton, but once pregnant, feels forced to leave so as to avoid problems with his wife and family. The latter is an uncanny, atavistic enactment of the policy of the Stolen Generations, as her future child will presumably lack the link to its Native family. This also confirms the rather ruthless simplicity of her romantic existentialism: "Jasmine patted her stomach. 'You just do it. That's all that matters.'"⁸³⁶

Indigenous voices reflect a complexity of Native society beyond essentialist definitions of Aboriginality, show a variety of effects by and attitudes towards contact with White civilisation, and trace the reasons for Native society's collapse. More the effect of than the cause for mainstream intervention with the Aboriginal underclass, serious signs of social breakdown are shown in some relationships of the younger mission Natives, which strongly map race across gender conflict. Alphonse and Araselli

⁸³⁴ 221-2 (my emphasis).

⁸³⁵ 227 (my emphasis).

⁸³⁶ 245.

start an affair without the Elder's (or the mission's) permission, and their defiance of kinship taboos ends up in selfish and irresponsible idleness. As the Aboriginal voice comments, "They were not allowed to look or talk to one another ... But now? Now they live in one room, have a baby together, don't hardly talk to anyone else, don't worry about nobody."⁸³⁷ The threesome Raphael, Stella and Gloria are caught up in a destructive spiral of domestic violence which puts imported notions of feminism to the test, as Billy and his wife find out. Raphael beats up his two wives when drunk and he no longer observes traditional law, for which his daughter Beatrice is sung with 'black' magic by the Elders. She ends up in mental hospital but only traditional medicine can reverse the disruption and degradation of community tissue exemplified in her madness: "True this be a mad place, in some ways. But we can fix that. Maybe. This one was a real story, but should not be. This bashing to show he is a powerful one, and to have control."⁸³⁸ Further breakdown is shown in some youngsters. Francis is a physically disadvantaged child who is beaten to death by racist, White drunks. These, in a stark indictment of mainstream justice, remain unpunished until the communal Aboriginal voice employs shamanic magic to 'sing' them: "Him dead. We got him. Just like old times. Still got power, See? True. True story."⁸³⁹ Deslie is an orphaned schoolboy who Billy takes to but cannot 'save': Deslie's sense of dislocation leads him to petrol sniffing and, thus, to serious mental damage and socially unacceptable behaviour.

Milton, Jasmine's lover, has the attitude of an activist; he aptly criticises the conversion of the settlement into a theme park for the tourist industry, and the condescension and degradation this causes:

Some of the people here say we should stop letting tourists in. They just treat us as we in a zoo, or something. Even government ones, not all of them. Talk to us like they can't talk proper English ... We can make money from them. Gerrard says that, lots of people say that to us. What for? What we want their money for? What can they give us for what we have? More grog? More card games? We must be mad bastards.⁸⁴⁰

⁸³⁷ 178.

⁸³⁸ 243.

⁸³⁹ 207-8.

⁸⁴⁰ 142.

He advocates for a discourse on taboo, the protection of traditional knowledge and self-management that aims to counter the wish for control behind Western humanitarian initiatives. He abhors scientists, who:

... say they will help us to look after our sites, and guard the old things. But, how come? In the old days we did look after the sacred sites ourselves ... We know what to do. These others shouldn't interfere with our sacred things. Kiddies of ours, young men even ... had to be initiated before they could go to these things and they sacred to us. They are very sacred things. We didn't say nothing to nobody, we just looked after these things ourselves ... What they want them for, too. It's not right for so many people to show them things. And what are we? They studying us too? Like animals? Or maybe they want to steal our secrets, and when even the black man has lost his special thing, then—hey, here it is!—the whitefellas have it and they use it on us. Maybe we'll have to change. Maybe make more things sacred, not just places, and keep them just for us.⁸⁴¹

Not surprisingly, he is one of the main actors in the territorial conflict that causes some of the non-Natives to leave. Nevertheless, his attitude shows signs of entrapment in that he takes to alcohol and Jasmine for his lover, which causes trouble with his Indigenous family.

Gabriella may be read as Billy's dark, female alter ego at the Aboriginal settlement, who joins him in teaching. Raised at the mission and a consumed artist attending a Melbourne university, she is also caught between mainstream and Native culture. As "[t]he bridging course she did at uni didn't connect these two worlds," she feels Karnama represents both home and backwardness.⁸⁴² She is ostensibly affected by the unproductive entrapment of White views between 'primitive' nostalgic romanticism and 'modern' liberal humanism:

I see now. I see it's a funny place. It's how people would like to think of Aboriginal people. Still some hunting, still bush tucker, some dancing, some art. Even a mission, a mission still with power. Clout. And then there's this

⁸⁴¹ 144.

⁸⁴² 79.

gambling, and drinking, and fighting. Kids running wild, and sleeping with dogs. The huts, and the campfires in the yard. I reckon the people, the government and the bureaucrats, the white mums and dads battling with their mortgages, the sports coaches and the teachers, all the wide world want to see Aboriginal people like this. But wanting to be helped, wanting to better themselves. Able to be helped even ... There's Aboriginal people everywhere you know. Even like you, paler. We are all different, but the same ... Not many Aboriginal people live like this here.

However, this identitarian confusion is contested by the communal Aboriginal voice, which avows for a strategic, postcolonising employment of identity politics based on the land as a binding factor:

*... maybe we gotta be the same so's we can make people remember that we belong here. 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 ... A Dreamt time. A maybe rented time. A time the fabric of which is torn and rent and now not holding together, like a torn flag fluttering. Like a magic carpet falling. But we never had.*⁸⁴³

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 Native notions of law and truth is through an inscription into the maternal. Fatima is purportedly "the first baby born on the mission,"⁸⁴⁴ 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 uncanny gaps and silences regarding mainstream policies of Aboriginal extermination, dispossession and dislocation. Charting this Native past together is problematic because both work from radically different traditions. Billy is reliant on literacy and the written record whereas Fatima on orality and custodianship, which constitutes a tense discursive space where

⁸⁴³ 166-7 (my emphasis).

⁸⁴⁴ 24.

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:

... we both burst into laughter. 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.⁸⁴⁵

Towards the end of *True Country*, the notion of passing on an Aboriginal oral heritage in textual shape—the result of which is this 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?”⁸⁴⁶

5.2.2. Identity and performance

The key issue in the uncanny contents of the text is how Billy and Walanguh may connect. Walanguh, Fatima's old and sick husband, is wrapped in layers of mystery and secrecy. Elusive and uncommunicative, he represents the uncanny remnants of a powerful past in a disempowered present. Sebastian reveals Walanguh's strong connection with maban reality to Billy:

All these stories I tell you happened in true life ... 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.⁸⁴⁷

⁸⁴⁵ 37-8.

⁸⁴⁶ 247 (my emphasis).

⁸⁴⁷ 67-9.

Billy's paternal inscription into the Native universe takes place in the slow revelation of his family connections to Walanguh, his grand-uncle by his father's mother, who was removed from the mission. This is an arduous negotiation that spans the whole novel. Not surprisingly for the text's attempts at making very different literary traditions and realms of knowledge and experience meet, language has a shifty and unsatisfactory role to play in this process and must give way to other forms of communication. 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."⁸⁴⁸ This miscommunication—an "atrophy ... of tradition" as Scott calls it⁸⁴⁹—uncannily foreshadows his Dreaming experiences of drowning in the river and rebirth in hospital. It also draws Billy's search for identity necessarily within sensorial parameters. The failure of linguistic communication—already encountered in the complications embedded in the story-telling project with Fatima—is an important issue throughout the novel; coming into full tribal knowledge is therefore non-linguistically configured in other spheres of experience: in the terrain of D/dreaming.

The text insists on notions of falling and flying, in which Billy's vertigo and rootedness in Western discourse denotes his inability to close the gaps in his hybrid identity. However, rising and flying mark his access to the Aboriginal universe through the Dreaming. Billy starts out charting the land around Karnama surveying from the airplane, studying maps, and reading mission journals, but he needs actual lived experience "to take him beyond that subject-object relationship."⁸⁵⁰ Feelings of elation are connected to small breakthroughs in his identity search, and marked by a sense of elevation and aerial freedom. Thus, he perceives of himself as a demigod "perched on a mountain top, or cloud" and "about to take off, and soar"⁸⁵¹ when 'storying' with Fatima. At the river he imagines "seeing all this from above, as if you were flying slowly, just drifting, quiet, way above them ... you are invisible, you cast no shadow." However, jumping from a tree into the river, as the Native children do, scares him and literally casts him down. The latter connects to a falling-and-drowning dream which haunts him in his childhood and symbolises his lost sense of self:

⁸⁴⁸ 147.

⁸⁴⁹ Guy 1994: 13.

⁸⁵⁰ Morrissey 2000: 319.

⁸⁵¹ 40, 44.

When he was a child he'd always dreamt of flying, but hadn't known about heights. He'd experienced vertigo one day walking around some cliffs above the sea. From then on his childhood dreams included the terror of heights, of falling from cliffs into the sea, falling, falling, falling; then entering the water without a disturbance and going down and down ... and the bubbles leaving his mouth for the light, shrinking, above.⁸⁵²

A point of inflection seems achieved when Walanguh's death is foreshadowed in a flying dream of a different kind, as it visually and emotionally tries to communicate Billy's inclusion into the family line and Native community. In this dream, Walanguh attempts to reach out to Billy as the un-dead ghost caught between life and death, and communicate his nephew's local belonging:

He saw the old man's face, very close to his own, and he saw the sleep in the corner of the eyes as the old man winked at him. The face began drifting away, and skilfully spat a wad of tobacco from one side of its mouth, without ceasing its cackle. Billy saw the old man, fat like a balloon, drifting along in the sunlight, way up above the mango trees and coconut palms. He was silent now. There was no sound now but the rustle of leaves in one breath of wind. A thin trail of smoke went straight up into the sky from a campfire below, and Walanguh drifted through it, drifted through it, and the smoke was barely disturbed. Billy stood among all the people of Karnama, all of them silent and in awe, but many of them not looking up at Walanguh drifting through the blue. Many were transfixed by the shadow, which, solid black, skimmed and rippled along the ground while the old man, naked and shameless, his penis shrivelled below his swollen belly, grinned and waved at those few who turned their eyes up to him. He drifted away and up, going up and up and away. And the noise returned to the people, who, with a cough and a sniff, turned to their other tasks. Except Fatima, who began wailing grief and beating her skull with her fists. And the dogs howled. Billy and Liz woke to the wailing early in the morning.⁸⁵³

⁸⁵² 90-1.

⁸⁵³ 147.

Despite Walanguh's efforts, Billy is increasingly confounded by the cacophony of conflicting discourses in his surroundings and looks for solace in alcohol and isolation. His connection with Walanguh and sense of self may only be fully (re)established by confronting the ghostly realm of the uncanny in what could be understood as an Aboriginal initiation ritual. Death is prefigured by the corpse of the "wise old crocodile,"⁸⁵⁴ trapped in a fish net once belonging to the project officer and stretched across the river by some of the Natives. An expert hunter and survivor, the animal stands for the continuation of the Indigenous tradition itself, but its gruesome death caused by White technology seems an ominous symbol that survival without adaptation is not possible. Not much later Billy is also engulfed by the local river, after a violent storm has trapped him in a womb-like ceremonial hut from which his Native rebirth is going to 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."⁸⁵⁵ However, in order to reach the safe haven of the Aboriginal settlement/Indigenous belonging Billy is forced to leave this temporary shelter and cross the unruly river. The river, whose waters have dangerously risen, comes alive as the life-giving rainbow serpent of Indigenous cosmology and devours Billy. Poised between life and death:

Billy stood at the river's edge. He entered the river slightly upstream from where he had crossed a short time ago. The water slapped his knees, grabbed him. Pushed and pulled him. He slipped. He turned back because he knew he couldn't cross, but slipped again. 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.⁸⁵⁶

The light at the end of the tunnel is an ambiguous symbol in which life and death uncannily circulate through each other, but some reviewers have taken it for Billy's and Aboriginal culture's demise. Nevertheless, the final scene at the hospital allows for a

⁸⁵⁴ 212.

⁸⁵⁵ 253.

⁸⁵⁶ 254 (my emphasis).

more complex inscription of identity. Billy may be seen to speak from the non-representative, liminal discursive space in which the un-dead 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."⁸⁵⁷ It is perhaps emblematic for the uncanny perception of contemporary Aboriginality, the enduring ideas on authenticity and the difficulty to understand tradition as performative and capable of change, that readership has often been wrong-footed by *True Country's* finale. Indeed, unlike the crocodile, Billy goes beyond physical and metaphorical death because he manages to become the hybrid product of two worlds which are often unintelligible to another but bound to get on in the same nation space. Billy's survival marks the novel's postcolonising 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"⁸⁵⁸ retrieve him from the river, Western medicine is not able to turn his drowning experience into a physical and spiritual resurrection. Healing must take place through the active engagement of the Aboriginal Dreaming, as already foreshadowed in Beatrice's recovery.⁸⁵⁹ Billy's levitated spirit observes his family members, past and present, gathered around his hospital bed, and joins Walanguh in flight over Karnama so as to inscribe himself onto 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 surveillant, objectifying male gaze shifts into an empathic embracement of the life-giving land:

... 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

⁸⁵⁷ Guy 1996: 11 (my emphasis).

⁸⁵⁸ 254.

⁸⁵⁹ Roslyn Brooks writes to this effect that "Scott's writing, uncompromising and grim, has therapeutic functions. One is ownership: recognition of the problems that corrode Indigenous communities, recognition that Aboriginal people themselves must resist and reverse their degradation. Scott goes beyond ownership of problems to suggest the possibility of new constructions of Aboriginal identity and community. Elements of traditional culture and wisdom can be combined with western knowledge and technology to rebuild a sense of meaning and of pride ... *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" (2004: 206).

green, that pool in the bend of the river, the green mission grounds, the cross of the airstrip.⁸⁶⁰

Would the disconnection with the physical body and sensation of levitation and ascension 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 a Native perspective on the regenerative power of water. As in answer to the meandering river's life-sustaining capacity, "The rain spat in the window, onto his face. *I felt it.*"⁸⁶¹ Reanimation is underlined in the narrative perspective shifting from third to first person singular, relocating subjectivity within Billy, and merging with the collective Aboriginal "we" that immediately follows. Thus, Scott's storying plots beyond the static, 'dead' core of Manichean race, gender and class discourse; the Aboriginal voice confirms the complex hybrid dynamics of contemporary identity formation by folding the end of the text into its beginning, and advocates for a re-inscription of Indigenous tradition as a postcolonising, 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 structures,"⁸⁶² it can be argued that in adapting and rewriting style and genre, *True Country* makes an important contribution to reconciling mutually exclusive notions of Aboriginality and Australianness. On the final count, *True Country* constitutes an uncanny crossbreed of *tabula rasa* and *palimpsest* discourses which dissolves the distinction between Billy's journeys out/back into one outback. Thus, it re/traces a joint non/Native 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 Postcolonising Dreaming Narrative effectively creates an inclusive meeting ground for linear and non-linear, oral and written, realist and non-realist '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 *Aboriginal* understanding of the land:

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

⁸⁶⁰ 254.

⁸⁶¹ 255 (my emphasis).

⁸⁶² Morrissey 2000: 319. He does, however, highlight Reconciliation as an "important contextual fram[e]."

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.⁸⁶³

5.3. 'Speak it from the Heart': *Benang*, Racial Elevation and Successful Failure

Like Kim Scott's first novel, *Benang* also addresses the many problems surrounding Aboriginal identity formation, but through an investigation of the devastating effects of the official eugenicist politics on the lives of Aborigines in Western Australia—particularly a Nyoongar mob of its south coast—between the late 19th century and 1970. These effects still endure, as Kim Scott's understanding of his own uncanny place in society—a light-skinned Aborigine, the result of such policies—may show: "I think it's an awkward historical position that I'm in really. It's reconciling the psyche almost."⁸⁶⁴ *Benang* is yet another novel with semi-autobiographical traces, which in many senses brilliantly continues Kim Scott's search for family, place and belonging set out on in *True Country*. As Anita Heiss says:

... it would not be denied by Scott that 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. In launching *Benang* at the Canberra Word Festival in March this year, Bill Jonas said that "the story illustrates, reflects and illuminates many of the issues which Kim Scott, the author, grapples with both as a writer and a person."⁸⁶⁵

This struggle for Native inscription is significantly given shape through fiction, which gives Scott room to write about his own family story 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."⁸⁶⁶ Thus, he is able to produce an uncommon, ground-breaking instance of Aboriginal life-writing. The fictionalising process allows him to carry out a genealogical investigation of his family line over several generations without being exposed to the

⁸⁶³ Scott 1993: 255 (my emphasis).

⁸⁶⁴ Guy 1996: 11.

⁸⁶⁵ Heiss 1999.

⁸⁶⁶ Scott 2000.

same harmful effects of public authentication as Sally Morgan suffered; at the same time, it enables him to state a clear and neat message regarding the Social-Darwinist policies mainstream Australia wielded against its Indigenous population for most of its post-first-contact history. The recovery of the protagonist's Native heritage initially concentrates on an assessment of the paternal line of ancestry. First there is the too-soon-to-die hybrid father figure, Thomas; next, the destructive presence of the White paternal grandfather, Ernest Solomon Scat, whose last name uncannily rings of the author's; then, his hybrid uncles Jack and Will; and finally, the founder of the 'dynasty', the 'White' great-great-grandfather Sandy One Mason. However, as the novel's title indicates, full Native inscription is only to be achieved by recovering the story of his 'full-blood' Native great-great-grandmother Fanny Benang, married to the 'White' sealer Sandy One by documented White ritual, which ultimately inscribes the narrative into a matrilineal solution.

5.3.1. Story and History: A. O. Neville and Ernest Scat

The vicissitudes of Harley's family members must be understood within the wider context of the colonisation of South Western Australia. As farming, mining, urban settlement and the road and railway network took over Indigenous land uses at the turn of the 20th century, state and national legislation and policies were imposed to justify and ease White occupation of the territory by increasingly writing the Native population out of its traditional place of belonging. The execution of policies of Aboriginal dispossession, removal and extermination in the area would go hand in hand with the overarching, domineering presence of an institutionalised White patriarchal figure. Thus, *Benang* stages the historical A. O. Neville, Chief Protector of the Aborigines in Western Australia between 1915 and 1940, and shows him to manipulate and curb Harley's forebears' lives directly and indirectly. Neville emulates with a much higher degree of sophistication one of the first Protectors of the Aborigines in Australia, George Augustus Robinson, whose 'charitable actions' are amply addressed in Mudrooroo's fiction. In *Benang*, Neville's eugenic ideology of "the gradual absorption of the native Australian black race by the White"⁸⁶⁷ is put into practice on the most personal of levels by his far removed fictional cousin, the amateur eugenicist Ernest Solomon Scat, who has

⁸⁶⁷ Scott 2003: 7. Further references to *Benang* in section 3 and 4 by page numbers only.

immigrated from Scotland to overcome the stifling restrictions of the British class system and carve out a new life for himself in Australian soil.⁸⁶⁸

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 practice of ‘black velvet’, so common in a frontier society peopled by single White male settlers with a tendency to force Native women to engage sexually with them.⁸⁶⁹ This behaviour had produced what Neville termed “*a sinister third race*”⁸⁷⁰ that threatened the neatly defined yet unstable racial boundaries Imperialist ideology—and access to the privileges of a budding White middle-class in Australia—relied upon. As Lisa Slater argues, Neville proposed a “rational”, and therefore “reasonable” solution for what was perceived as a racial problem by Western civilisation:

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. He asserted that in such a time of crisis his eugenicist theories offered a solution to the problem ... In colonial racial constructions, the ‘half-caste’ is represented as a historical misconception, an aberration from the natural order: a result of a history in which some settlers did not perform civilization correctly ... 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.⁸⁷¹

⁸⁶⁸ 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 2000).

⁸⁶⁹ 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 (Ferrier 2007).

⁸⁷⁰ 31. Scott paraphrases from A. O. Neville’s *Australia’s Coloured Minority: Their Place in Our Community* (Sydney: Currawong P.C. 1947)

⁸⁷¹ Slater 2006: (54-5).

What we may nowadays term the pseudo-science of eugenics⁸⁷² is inscribed in the far determinist end of the nature-nurture debate, and represents a dark foil to Darwin's theory that proclaimed the blind mechanism of natural selection—the survival of the fittest species through adaptation to local habitats and ecological niches—as the motor of evolution. Eugenics proposed, however, the belief that the human race could be hereditarily improved by selective breeding, and had its greatest impact on Western societies between the late 1900s and the Second World War, as US and European repressive regulations on immigration, marriage and contraception, and the Nazi extermination of the Jews prove. It was also successfully exported to White settler nations, as the longevity of South-African *Apartheid* and the *White Australia Policy* may show. As Harley ironically muses, “*It is survival of the fittest, and let the fittest do their best.*”⁸⁷³ Eugenics was developed, in fact, by Charles Darwin's cousin Sir Francis 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 theorised on 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 consciously directed turned eugenics not only into a theoretical construct but also into a set of beliefs encrypted within a political agenda of White middle-class male supremacy.⁸⁷⁴ This monopolizing discursive ‘patrix’ also insisted on “[t]he 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.”⁸⁷⁵

Benang comments on the discursive links between race, class and gender by highlighting the strategic connections between the pseudo-science cum colonial policy of eugenics, the availability of a disenfranchised Native workforce in the colonial economy and White, male desire for dark, Native women. This link is at the heart of the uncanny, uncontrolled proliferation of disowned hybrid progeny—a sinister, vampiric third race which sucks on unstable racial borders—through the opportunities of abuse occasioned by the Aborigines’ disempowerment as the colonial underclass. White, male desire in the

⁸⁷² The term was coined by Sir Francis Galton and derived from the Greek “eugenes”, meaning “well-born” or “hereditarily endowed with noble qualities” (see Works Cited: “eugenics”).

⁸⁷³ 16. Scott uses this quote also in his Deakin lecture (2001); he took it from the *Western Australian Parliament Debates* 28 (1905), p. 315.

⁸⁷⁴ See Works Cited: “eugenics”. Interestingly, Darwin had already argued against the idea of race in his *Descent of Man*, published in 1874 (Gardiner-Garden 2000).

⁸⁷⁵ Slater 2003: 362.

colonial setting is channelled through the rape of Native women, either living at Native settlements or employed in domestic service, and its procreative results are subsequently exorcised and hidden 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 Native ‘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 towards the forging of an all-White Australia with measures that aimed to secure racial boundaries on both the outside and inside of the island-continent, and limit access to Australia’s natural resources to mainly Anglo-Celtic settlers. The 1905 Aboriginal Act produced a binding, legal definition of Aboriginality 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.⁸⁷⁶

⁸⁷⁶ Slater 2006: 67, footnote 11. She quotes from Haebich 2001: 216-20.

In 1936, still under Neville, who had meanwhile grown into a powerful and determining authority in national Aboriginal affairs, this Act was modified to include and control the greatest amount of ‘black velvet’s sinister offspring’ possible. 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.⁸⁷⁷

Significantly, *Benang* is driven by documentary research of government files on the effects of Western Australia’s eugenicist policies on Scott’s family over the last 5 generations, but from a fictional perspective. Thus, *Benang* describes the perverse and devastating impact of the Acts’ binary, exclusivist language on Harley’s (part-) Indigenous ancestors; dehumanising the Natives, it curbed their possibilities for participating in mainstream society as independent, free, responsible citizens. They were condemned to languishing in Native reserves, participating in the colonial economy as virtual or sexual slaves, or passing as Whites, all of which often threatened to break their resistance and resulted in feelings of self-hate, shame and guilt. As *Benang* records, like “[m]any 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.’”⁸⁷⁸ In writing this novel, Kim Scott was greatly concerned with countering the racist nature of the language he had encountered in the colonial records dealing with his ancestors, which would form the basis for Harley’s fictional quest. In *Benang* it is Scott’s aim:

⁸⁷⁷ Quoted in Scott 2003: 151 from Anna Haebich’s *For Their Own Good*. Nedlands: UQP 1988. 349.

⁸⁷⁸ 428.

... 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.⁸⁷⁹

Thus, *Benang* is an intent to “defuse or detonate all those nasty ways of thinking about oneself—that to an extent I’d internalised if I thought of myself as Aboriginal. It would clear a space for other people I know to have their say as well” by putting himself provocatively on the line for scrutiny through his fiction. Scott is very clear on his own position as a victim of the breeding-out or ‘biological-absorption’ policies. Thus, *Benang* comments on his uncanny position in Australian society while using this heteroglossic location to formulate a new language and speaking positions for the great variety of Native experiences available in Australia.⁸⁸⁰

As a fiction, *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. Not surprisingly perhaps, Ern runs a boarding-house for gentlemen, with the uncanny ring of a brothel and sexual laboratory in which coloured maids, “aunties” and female “business partners” never stop to circulate, and Whitened bodies are generated.⁸⁸¹ As *Benang* so convincingly shows, the carefully developed eugenicist language, which employed the legal categories of ‘full blood’, ‘half-caste’, ‘quadroon’ and ‘octoroon’ to indicate the ‘dilution’, ‘absorption and assimilation’ of ‘recessive’ Native by ‘dominant’ White blood and genes, would provide the average White Australian settler with the language of a benign, altruistic and officially-endorsed paradigm with which to participate in Aboriginal genocide on the personal and local level. Native dispossession, removal and extermination was mirrored in their economic and sexual slavery, and simply formed part of helping ‘primitives’ give way to ‘progress’ modelled on Western scientific thought. This paradigm of racial superiority allows Ernest Solomon Scat to ‘leave his mark’ on Australia and participate with his genes in the eugenicist breeding-out programme, disguising his lust as scientific

⁸⁷⁹ Kuhnkrishnan 2003a.

⁸⁸⁰ Scott 2000.

⁸⁸¹ 17-21.

method. Thus, it is through the figure of Harley's grandfather that *Benang* is firmly inscribed in the Gothic.

In his relentless obsession with absorbing 'black' blood and creating White offspring by turning White desire into invasive genetic experiment, Ern represents an evil, male version of the colonial vampire.⁸⁸² This defines the colonial project as monstrous, as it is significantly inscribed in the need to make the Australian earth, rather than European soil, the vampire's resting place. As Hillary Emmett points out, Ern's obsessive aim to create the first White man born is inscribed in a common colonialist agenda amongst White settlers, whose (often amateur) historians would carry out searches of origins on the most local of levels so as "to make whiteness Indigenous—to claim land as birthright."⁸⁸³ Or as Scott himself argues, "[t]o claim the first white man born is a desire to make a fresh start. To begin. To be the noble pioneers creating a society."⁸⁸⁴ Under the protection of Neville, who intellectually and legally fathers his fictional cousin's vampiric transformation, Ern's invasion of the Australian Body perversely uses sexual penetration as the means to control, recreate and 'Whiten' the Indigenous environment to his own advantage. This desire is foremost played out in his sexual abuse of his grandson Harley, who should become the first White man born in the family:

At least he accepted that I could not look directly at him on such an occasion, and so 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.⁸⁸⁵

Thus, Harley says, "Whatever the confusions of my genealogy, there seems little doubt that my grandfather intended to be my creator ... a rationalisation of his desire."⁸⁸⁶ The latter turns into an inscription Harley means to contest as it has made him "castrated, *absorbed*, bugged-up, striving to be more than a full stop, to sabotage my grandfather's social experiment, to repopulate his family history"⁸⁸⁷ with White offspring.

⁸⁸² The racial obsession with the 'purity' of the blood underlying the Victorian invention of the vampire is discussed in chapter 4.

⁸⁸³ Emmett 2005: 177.

⁸⁸⁴ Scott 2001.

⁸⁸⁵ 80.

⁸⁸⁶ 33.

⁸⁸⁷ 451.

Not surprisingly, the beginning of *Benang* emulates *True Country* in conjuring up the image of the narrator/author in front of the blank page, who struggles with scarce, almost no material to attempt writing himself out of his position as the “the first-born-successfully-white-man-in-the-family-line”⁸⁸⁸ and into a space that is not determined by White, racist discourse. In *Benang*, however, the *tabula rasa* of the blank page immediately reveals an uncanny White charge of colonialist meaning which prevents an Indigenous re-tracing of the text-scape; colonial discourse constructed the Australian geography as a *Terra Nullius*, empty from prior human habitation and therefore meaningless, and thus refused the Natives an authoritative speaking position from which to participate in constructing the Australian nation and identity. It is precisely in sucking dry and decolouring a land and text-scape pregnant with Indigenous meaning that “Ern and his contemporaries’ style of writing is a form of thinking that rehearses *terra nullius*.”⁸⁸⁹ And this determines Harley’s problems in penning down an alternative (hi)story and identity.

Thus, the protagonist cum narrator can only rely on a tenuous, utterly marginal speaking position from which to embark on the enterprise of uncovering the colonial palimpsest and re/discovering an Indigenous inscription of his life. Yet, this is what he manages throughout the novel by inscribing himself as a relatively benign, White-skinned Native ghost who embarrasses and discomforts his human environment by the uncanny identitarian possibility he represents.⁸⁹⁰ Surviving a near-mortal accident, “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.*”⁸⁹¹ Harley’s anti-Social-Darwinist quest, then, is one of turning the overbearing legacy of his White grandfather to the advantage of an obscured Aboriginal heritage by placing the racist language of Ern’s files in a different context. Harley’s 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

⁸⁸⁸ 13.

⁸⁸⁹ Slater 2006: 61.

⁸⁹⁰ 9.

⁸⁹¹ 16.

my ancestors, and for their children in turn. And therefore, inevitably, most especially, for myself.⁸⁹²

5.3.2. Racial elevation and identitarian flight: the matrilineal and patrilineal

At the start of the novel, Harley's sense of self is 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 cum surrogate wife Topsy, who is in fact the illegitimate offspring of his 'octoroon' ex-wife Kathleen Coolman and the White local police officer, Sergeant Hall. Ern had planned Tommy to be the first successfully White man born in the family, but he turns out to be a 'failure' by the rigidities of a legally imposed binary conception of identity that re-inscribes him into Aboriginality at the very moment of his birth:

... new legislation, referring to the day before his birth, prevented Tommy being our first white man born, and put him in danger of understanding himself in ways that would only deform and oppress him. His grandmother gave him pride, and a sense of spirit, and then Ern and Aunty Kate conspired to keep him ashamed and on the run. It was only when he was grown—when he was an adult, with children—that he began to listen again, and try to put words to how he felt, to who he was.⁸⁹³

The shifty, arbitrary artificiality of these legally inscribed racial boundaries determines Tommy's vexed, rebellious nature; thus, Harley is the fruit of an affair between Tommy and one of Ern's domestic servants cum sexual slaves, Ellen,⁸⁹⁴ which defies patriarchal authority. After a drowning incident in which a part-Aboriginal baby dies but the seven-year-old Harley is saved by his father, Tommy is forced to give his son into his White grandfather's custody, who perceives a last chance to fulfil his eugenicist project; a

⁸⁹² 21 (see also 12, 31 and 351).

⁸⁹³ 367. The new legislation refers to the 1936 Act. Aunty Kate is not a family member but the head of a boarding school cum children's home (385-99).

⁸⁹⁴ As behoves in 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.

grandfather who not only attempts to educate Harley into Whiteness but also sexually abuses him in his perverse urge to literally “fuck [him] white.”⁸⁹⁵ Indeed, Ern’s incest with his grandson is a reproduction of his abject behaviour towards his son Tommy, and inscribes their relationships in a colonialist version of oedipal conflict which aims to write out the Native mother—relationships which, due to their homosexual nature, can bear no biological fruit and need Indigenous females as expendable reproductive stations.

Ern’s project is racially as well as patriarchally inscribed in that it aims for the first ‘White’ man rather than woman, and as such reproduces the misogynist prejudices of the Christian origin story 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 males’ lust, but in black women’s perversion, as the official qualification of “notorious prostitute” for Harley’s Aboriginal great-great-grandmother, Fanny Benang, testifies.⁸⁹⁶ This means that child removal is officially promoted to undercut the uncanny social problem provided by hybridity in a racially organised society, in the intent to Whitewash these publicly disowned children and maintain artificial racial borders. Ern’s project is all the uncannier because he consistently expels the dark mothers of his offspring from his surroundings, usurps the Whitewashed artefact of his eugenic success, Harley, by taking him from his father’s custody, and uses him as one of his sexual playthings. 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.”⁸⁹⁷

Harley’s manifest dis-ease is just one of the ways in which patriarchal inscription is consistently disenfranchised in *Benang*. To start with, it is not entirely clear whether Harley is Ern’s or his son’s Tommy’s child by Ellen. The biological, hierarchical model is also troubled by the confused placing of Topsy, Tommy’s mother, within the family tree diagram. Furthermore, a series of unacknowledged children—often unnamed or provided with identical names, such as Uncle Jack (Dinah Mason Benang and the White Daniel Coolman’s illegitimate offspring)—circulate through the genealogical picture. Lastly, eugenic terminology blatantly fails to adequately capture kinship relations as another Whitewashing vampire, the Travelling Inspector of Aborigines, may show in his

⁸⁹⁵ 29.

⁸⁹⁶ 106.

⁸⁹⁷ 26.

incapacity to pinpoint Fanny and Sandy One Mason's racial inscription.⁸⁹⁸ The end result is one of "profound genealogical bewilderment,"⁸⁹⁹ and ultimately, Harley's alternative, de-hierarchized inscription of identity becomes eminently matriarchal: "My true ancestors" are "those of my blood-and-land-line, the women I must call Harriette and Fanny."⁹⁰⁰ This means that *Benang* increasingly concentrates on a configuration of identity through the land rather than blood, which announces a move from Gothic nightmare to Aboriginal Dreaming. Thus, *Benang*'s agenda is to reverse the Biblical account, fuelled by Harley's desire to move from the 'evil' White male end-product to the 'benign' Aboriginal female root. Remodelling 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"⁹⁰¹ that writes itself out of a bloody oedipal text into a regenerative understanding of the Indigenous land. As the car accident in which Tommy dies is the product of a quarrel over the reasons for his father's relinquishing of his son's custody, the oedipal thrust of Harley's guilt complex determines to what extent he feels emptied-out, blinded, castrated and uprooted.⁹⁰²

Literally uprooted and enacting the eugenicist motto of "*Uplift[ing] a despised race*,"⁹⁰³ 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 ... It was easy enough to come down again ... through what I now realise was the thinnest of narratives, my father's few words.⁹⁰⁴

With this oppressive physical barrier, curbing Harley's uncanny 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 ceiling's whiteness emulates the colour of his skin, its artificial, uninterrupted flatness

⁸⁹⁸ 488.

⁸⁹⁹ Emmett 2005: 181.

⁹⁰⁰ 51.

⁹⁰¹ 24.

⁹⁰² For the Oedipus complex, see chapter 2, p. 45 and further.

⁹⁰³ 29.

⁹⁰⁴ 13 (my emphasis).

and thinness also work as metaphors for the tenuousness of Harley's White identity as inscribed on his "blank, colonized mind."⁹⁰⁵ What is more, they emulate the insubstantial whiteness of blank sheets of paper—an alternative colonial history uncannily un/written which his castrated pen is at first unable to rewrite. In his attempt for a complete physical and spiritual recovery after coming back from the dead, Harley aims to scribble as well as uncover his black family history's lines onto the pages of his defective personal story, Whitewashed body and blank mind. This may only start taking place by grounding his narrative in the recovery of the sadly-lost figure of his father: "It was easy enough to come down again ... through what I now realise was the thinnest of narratives, my father's few words,"⁹⁰⁶ which spoke of Aboriginal 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. This shamanic capacity for flight enables him to configure his genealogical uprootedness into "a place to land,"⁹⁰⁷ and turn the colonial language of racial elevation against itself. Scott's awareness of the limitations of Western language and discourse lead John Fielder to highlight:

[t]he ironic and 'magic realist' elements of *Benang* [, which] function to deal with the past in ways that push the boundaries of predominantly social-realist reading formations. Social realism tends to conform to well-worn expectations about the 'truth' of the past, and the 'truth' of Aboriginality; however, these expectations often do not match with the diversity and complexity of Aboriginal people's lived experiences. Scott describes this as "drab social realis[m]..." and 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.⁹⁰⁸

Not surprisingly therefore, *Benang* spells out in great detail how eugenic language fails to capture and fix the complexities and realities of Aboriginal and hybrid kinship

⁹⁰⁵ Slater 2006: 58.

⁹⁰⁶ 15.

⁹⁰⁷ Scott 1993: 254.

⁹⁰⁸ Fielder 2006: 6.

relations, which is what initially befuddles Harley on his search. Harley's kinship relations are wildly confusing and riddled by the silences, gaps and classificatory inaccuracies imposed by Western discourse; in analysing Harley's Aboriginal great-great-grandmother Fanny Benang and her direct family, "[Sergeant Hall] had to call them all half-castes and ignore the range of hues."⁹⁰⁹ It is when Harley, the "empty-scrotumed, limp-dicked first man born,"⁹¹⁰ taps into the life of Fanny, that the White, Western patriarchal script and oedipal narrative are definitively overturned. Fanny is married to the 'octoroon' Sandy One Mason, whom she instructs in a Native sensibility to the landscape. She understands that in order to survive she has to negotiate a space for a hybrid Native 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 utilise for the purpose of metamorphosis."⁹¹¹ In reciprocity to Fanny's matrilineal, regenerative and promiscuous understanding of identity, Harley—and Scott by extension—attempts to shape-shift the White skin of Australian'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.⁹¹²

In order to achieve the latter, Harley's part-Indigenous uncles Jack and Will decide to interfere in Ern and Harley's incestuous relationship. They have realised Harley is in deep identity trouble after his discovery of Ern's eugenic files, which have revealed all sorts of uncanny connections to a hidden Aboriginal past: "Yeah, well this is just to make you sad, reading and looking at [photos] like this. It's just a wadjela way of

⁹⁰⁹ 86.

⁹¹⁰ 33.

⁹¹¹ Slater 2005a: 70.

⁹¹² 473-4.

thinking, this is. You should just relax, feel it. You gotta go right back, ask your spirits for help.”⁹¹³ What Harley needs is a lived, felt experience of place, kinship and past in order to “unsettl[e] the binary of coloniser and colonised and enabl[e] Harley not to be a slave to slavery.”⁹¹⁴ They therefore take him and the now paralysed and silenced Ern on a long, restoring walkabout,⁹¹⁵ visiting the places where their Native ancestors once lived. 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.”⁹¹⁶

This walk-about, 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 structures and metaphors. The uncanny liminal site from which Harley manages to tell his story is that of the haunting, un-dead ghost—“I realised that I had come back from the dead, was one of those few. I may well be djanak, or djangha.”⁹¹⁷ Harley’s final transformation into a djanak/shaman with a discomfiting capacity for singing the spirit of the land shows to what extent he has outdone his father, a failed but “deadly singer” who scatted his discomfiting identity between his ‘black skin’ and ‘White heart’.⁹¹⁸ Reconnected to the past, present and the future through a multiplicity of kinship links:

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.

⁹¹³ 113. “Wadjela” is Nyoongar for “white”.

⁹¹⁴ Slater 2003: 368.

⁹¹⁵ According to the *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition*, in Australian usage to go “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” (See Works Cited: “walkabout”).

⁹¹⁶ Scott 2000.

⁹¹⁷ “I realised that I had come back from the dead, was one of those few. I may well be djanak, or djangha” (165). The Nyoongar word “djanak” or “djangha” means “maban” or shaman.

⁹¹⁸ 425-6. “deadly” means “great” in Aboriginal English, but the qualifier acquires an uncanny connotation in this context.

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.⁹¹⁹

5.3.3. Horizontality and verticality: trees, roots and rhizomes

In this alternative, hybrid model of genealogy, Harley's ancestry is not so much organised vertically, lineally and hierarchically, as in the "sharply ruled diagrams"⁹²⁰ of his White grandfather's eugenic project, but rather diffusedly and horizontally, according to an Aboriginal understanding of kinship that, moreover, uncannily incorporates multiple incestuous, adulterous and illegitimate Western incursions. However, Harley manages to tap strength out of the categorical fuzziness of this confusing hybrid proliferation: "Interrelatedness ceases to be an object of guilt, ridicule and denigration ... and becomes a source of sexual and emotional fulfilment..." The kinship model that arises out of *Benang's* genealogical confusion is "relational and continuous", primes a collective politics, and "offers a relatedness which is enacted through storytelling."⁹²¹ In the latter sense, the visible, sanctioned, patriarchal and hierarchical European tree diagram is supplanted for an invisible, promiscuous, matrilineal and *rhizomatic* model of resistance, survival and growth. This follows the reproductive capacity of some roots to produce offshoots from any underground position independently, thus allowing plant life to resist and propagate.

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari take the qualities of the rhizome as the basis for a non-hierarchical interpretation of theory and research with multiple entry points; it opposes itself to the arborescent conception of knowledge that relies on binary categories and choices in a vertical and linear model, so common in traditional Western science. A rhizomatic model, however, works with horizontal and trans-species connections,⁹²² and contains therefore subversive qualities of resistance to hierarchical narratives of cause and effect. Thus, Hillary Emmett argues that "[t]he network Harley's storytelling creates has neither beginning nor end and no clear distinctions between generations, or even siblings and cousins" so that "Harley's quest ... produces an account

⁹¹⁹ 456-7 (my emphasis).

⁹²⁰ 29.

⁹²¹ Emmett 2005: 181-2.

⁹²² Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 21.

of history which is rhizomatic, contingent, and multiple rather than linear, determined, and singular.”⁹²³

Indeed, in *Benang* trees are the outward signs of underground resistance to White invasion from the hidden level of their Indigenous roots, and thus become a significant Native landscape feature whose connectedness to the presence of water link to the source of life and survival itself. Indeed, they are intensely connected to the land, which is the most singular signifier in the understanding of the Aboriginal universe. Thus, Harley describes how:

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.*⁹²⁴

The Indigenous gum tree, a member of the eucalyptus family that reproduces through both seeding and a rhizomatic re-sprouting, offers a place of shelter for adults, learning and play for the future generations and a general healing encounter with nature. However, its creeping subversive roots, which threaten the very structures of settler society, greatly upset Ern. Indeed, his fears of destruction echo a story about the local Balga trees Kim Scott recounts in an interview, in which the tree itself becomes the feared Indigene:

Well they are really important trees to Noongyar culture for all sorts of reasons. The reason they are called ‘Blackboys’ I think has something to do with this little story from the first decade that Perth was established in the 1830’s. There was a bloke, a diarist, was walking from Perth to Fremantle on this sandy track and he comes to this spot where these two other colonists trying [*sic*] to uproot this Balga or ‘Blackboy’ tree as they call it. He goes and says to them what are you doing? Because they are hard to rip up. They are red faced, and sweaty, and hot, and they’re saying “we got to get rid of this

⁹²³ Emmett 2005: 178.

⁹²⁴ 109-10. This description matches with the stringybark, a member of the eucalyptus species.

tree cause everyday we're walking down here and we look up on this sandy slope, and we see this tree and we think it's a blackfella. We think its [*sic*] a native standing there watching us. And we get frightened." That little story tells me something about the fear and psychosis that is in mainstream Australia.⁹²⁵

The twisted, psychological nature of Ern's aversion against the thriving trees comes fully to the fore when his Native wife Kathleen takes him to a group of healthy trees near a waterhole. Uncle "Jack dug around the tree to expose a root. They cut one off, and Jack held it above Ern's mouth. 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."⁹²⁶ Ern's aversion links up to the uncanny invisibility and resistance of a world beyond the coloniser's control, which—in all its potential for survival and life itself—remains hidden, secret and, in many senses, sacred in its connectedness to the Aboriginal universe.

In the face of White colonisation, the Aboriginal elder Paddy Roe elaborates on the public/profane and the secret/sacred through what one may understand as a rhizomatic distinction between under and on the ground:

... the top soil is belongs ANYbody can walk—walk around, camp, Anywhere, we can't tell-im he got no right to be there—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.⁹²⁷

In Roe's words, underground resistance to the omnipresence of White invasion of the land is scripted in terms of 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, when Harley writes:

⁹²⁵ Buck 2001. White settlers believed Balgas resembled Aborigines holding an upright spear, because of the shape of the tree trunk and the grassy cups. As the term Blackboy is considered offensive nowadays, the name "Grasstree" is preferred.

⁹²⁶ 129.

⁹²⁷ Quoted in Gelder & Jacobs 1998: 107. Originally from Muecke 1992: 104.

... of railways, and fences, and of extensive pages of notes—I give a nod to my grandfather, to his lines and his discipline, to his schemes and his rigour. And I further acknowledge, and nod to, the demands of Historical Fiction. And I nod with the resentment which those I will call my people felt, still feel. Nod nod nod. I hope you're not falling asleep ... Once upon a time Grandad rattled and snorted along the Great Southern Railway. How crucial this railway was in facilitating the development of the wheatbelt, this lucky land's prosperity, and the alienation of so many of us. Nod nod.⁹²⁸

Indeed, the initial White expansion into the coastal outposts of Western Australia, the area where Ern settles, is triggered by:

... an isolated and tiny railway which stitched its brief way from Wirlup Haven to Gebalup, at which point it promptly stopped, as if it was a small scar in the earth. To the west, still days away by horse, a vast railway network reached, and wheat fields sprang up and ran away from each of its lines. It seemed logical. Get there. Buy land in between the railway tips. Then, just as soon as the lines connected ...⁹²⁹

But eventually, as White civilisation and its History lack proper roots in the land, as it cannot really 'puncture' Australian soil, reach its depths and hold on to complete its vampiric thrust, they fold back onto themselves and contract, while Native culture and narrative resist. There were:

Dry winds, sun, no water. Ern rattled across a land rapidly becoming a desert. Cleared of trees, its skin blew away in a searing wind. The land's fluids rose to the raw surface, and they were thick and salty ... The miners had left, the farmers left ... The railway line; shrivelling back to some centre ... but there was always, somewhere, some tight and curling *bush*, and still-secret *waterholes*.⁹³⁰

⁹²⁸ 324-6.

⁹²⁹ 46.

⁹³⁰ 118 (my emphasis).

This leads Hillary Emmett to the view that rhizomatic resistance of the Native element works on the level of land as well as narrative, and is intimately interlocked:

Scott's novel ... 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. The rhizome in this context does not simply designate a subterranean root system, but refers to the way in which language oscillates between standard and non-standard forms, and the way that the temporalities of history are reversed and disordered.⁹³¹

Underground resistance to the imposition of artificial racial-colonial boundaries, which unsuccessfully aim to empty out the landscape from its original, Indigenous features, creates an uncanny liminal space from which the hybrid subaltern may speak. This creates a disruptive narrative style that does not obey to linear progress of cause and effect and single-focus objective prose—what Harley disparagingly calls the White “demands of Historical Fiction”. It is in “confusing things, not following an appropriate sequence”⁹³² and employing a “clumsy narrative”⁹³³ that Harley wilfully estranges mainstream readers from the characteristics of the traditional novel, and opens up uncanny, hidden spaces where an alternative Indigenous narrative may be seen to develop. Thus, Harley's ‘storying’ or ‘singing’ obliquely sneaks/snakes through seemingly random polyphony, poetic association, metaphor and flash forward and backward; it constantly holds the reader in check with its intentionally confusing, uncanny secrets and revelations that defy straightforward notions of family belonging. Thus 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.”⁹³⁴ Scott's idiosyncratic micro-narrative of ‘the most local of histories’ therefore turns from a deceptively straight, ‘simple’ account of ‘authentic’ Whiteness into an uncannily promiscuous “family history.”⁹³⁵ This alternative account

⁹³¹ Emmett 2005: 176.

⁹³² 99.

⁹³³ 167.

⁹³⁴ Armellino 2007: 26.

⁹³⁵ 12.

defamiliarises the reader from mainstream notions of home—that is, from Australianness as inscribed in an ‘original’ and ‘legitimate’ White, male, middle-class genealogy of ownership and belonging.

It is significant therefore, that Harley maintains a certain amount of secrecy towards the identity of his first, ‘blackfella’ girlfriends, who set him out on his identity search, bear him child, connect him back to his traditional land and kin, and give him his writing/singing voice:

Can you imagine how I felt, seeing these two women again? ... I want to preserve the anonymity of those two women, in case my writing proves to be just another way in which I embarrass and discomfort people. The two of them helped me grow from my bitter and isolated self; let me reconcile myself to what it means to be so strangely uplifted; one who hovers, and need only touch the round lightly. They brought others to hear me sing, and it is not their fault if I’m unable to bring together people from beyond our very small core. They led me back to writing, after I had turned away from it because of the struggles with my grandfather’s words. 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.⁹³⁶

This secrecy is in fact a sensible measure to protect the terribly abused female side of his family group, and a refusal to appropriate a set of experiences Harley may not feel empowered to understand or reveal. This inscribes *Benang* in an Aboriginal tradition of story-telling, where the principle of custody is paramount. As Scott says in an interview:

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. That’s partly why I made Harley the person that he is. That and his connections obviously to my own position. That’s also

⁹³⁶ 451-2.

why the story in a gender way a lot why it is told from a male point of view [sic], where I hope that it would be respectful of those older Noongyar [sic] women but it doesn't enter into their consciousness as it does with the males that are depicted.⁹³⁷

It is not surprising, therefore, that Harley says towards the end of *Benang*, “We have always been surrounded by others. Needed to communicate with them, and yet be wary and watchful.”⁹³⁸ This statement also neatly lays out the uncanny multicultural predicament Australia has found itself in in the Age of Mabo, which has allowed for uncanny Native speaking positions and un-dead Indigenous ghosts to haunt its geography. Thus, the polyphony of Harley's hybrid family speaks of Aboriginal dispossession, displacement, disruption and extermination on *Benang*'s pages:

[T]he individual life stories are bound together into an imposing saga which might seem reminiscent of certain modes of South American narrative, but which should actually be recognized as being in line with the ‘life stories’ of contemporary Aboriginal authors such as Sally Morgan. This genre 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.⁹³⁹

This Aboriginal epic, a powerful fiction of community constructed to deliver a counter-narrative to the White Nation's official version of History forged through the eugenic records of A. O. Neville and his acolytes, uncannily mirrors the position of the author and many of his kin in society; Scott's family unsettle binary conceptions of Aboriginality through their very existence as White-skinned Aborigines and through the elaboration of their narrative,⁹⁴⁰ whose black-on-white print is already hybrid.

5.3.4. Ghosts and Shamans: Dream(ing) and Nightmare

Harley's condition as a haunting, uncanny ghost is in part determined and reinforced by the fact that he speaks from an existing location connected to Scott's family as well as to

⁹³⁷ Buck 2001.

⁹³⁸ 474.

⁹³⁹ Armellino 2007: 19.

⁹⁴⁰ Scott's aunt/*kayang* Hazel Brown comes to mind.

death. *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 20th century with gold and copper mining but declined with World War I, and was connected to Hopetoun (Ravensthorpe's port on the coast) by one of the isolated branch lines of the Western Australian Government Railways. Eads and Roberts explain in their submission to Paul Seaman's *Aboriginal Land Inquiry*, that:

Many Nyungars today speak with deep feeling about this wild, windswept country. They tell stories about the old folk they lost in the 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.⁹⁴¹

As Scott explains in *Kayang and Me*, his family is closely connected to Ravensthorpe and intimately involved in this gruesome episode of frontier violence that took place in 1880, known as the Cocanarup massacre.⁹⁴² A further link with the novel is revealed by one of *Kayang*'s hand-drawn local maps, which shows the coastal areas of Mason's Bay and Fanny Cove, harking back to the fictional founders of Harley's family and their connection to the sea.

In *Benang*, Ravensthorpe is clearly emulated 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 18 Natives. In *Benang*, the massacre is in fact a reprise of a previous episode of 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.⁹⁴³ Before running off, Wonyin retaliates for the violence and humiliation suffered by killing one of the Mustles with an axe. The consequence of the

⁹⁴¹ Quoted in Scott 2003: 7 (my emphasis). Commissioner Paul Seaman's official report *The Aboriginal Land Inquiry* was published in Perth in 1984 and looked into Western Australian Native Title issues.

⁹⁴² Scott & Brown: 18. An article in the ABC News Online of 22 March 2007 highlights how these wounds of the past have still not healed amongst the Aboriginal families whose ancestors were massacred at Ravensthorpe (<http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2007/03/22/1878501.htm>, accessed 8 Oct 2009).

⁹⁴³ 173-7.

resulting massacre, which affects a host of Aboriginal mobs gathered in the area for corroborees, is that “[m]y family left and did not return for many years. It was such a *sorry place*.” Eads and Roberts’ words are echoed in *Benang*: “most Nyoongars still won’t come here, just wind up the windows and drive right through Gebalup.”⁹⁴⁴ Not surprisingly, Gebalup turns into an uncanny “death place” and “the shrinking town kept ... free of the pressure that towns elsewhere were feeling. The *native* camps at their edges always threatened to spill over their boundaries. Threatened to unsettle, to intrude. But Getalup, for some reason had so few *natives*.”⁹⁴⁵ The latter, ironically enough, affects the local economy negatively as a readily available, cheap labour force is absent; yet, this does initially offer a niche of subsistence to Sandy One, who tries to make his family pass for White. Nevertheless, the increasing tightening up of the racial barrier strangles their possibilities for survival, and allows Ern’s eugenic/vampiric meddling with the family’s progeny; thus, the matrilineal promise encapsulated in Fanny’s family name, a Nyoongar reference to the future, threatens to become associated with Native death. Scott himself explains to this effect that “[t]he novel’s title—*Benang*—is a Noongar word meaning ‘tomorrow’. It was also one of the spellings given to the name of an ancestor of mine. With one lonely word I hoped to join a past to a possible future.”⁹⁴⁶

The association of Gebalup with death and sickness country can be teased out further. 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 Native sustenance by stripping it from 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

⁹⁴⁴175-7 (my emphasis).

⁹⁴⁵ 325, 119.

⁹⁴⁶ Scott 2007: 5.

their hands to strangers, and were herded about like sheep or cattle, though less well fed.⁹⁴⁷

But 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 metaphorically and literally metamorphoses into a ghost town, a place only for and occupied by ghosts, whose paleness the Natives traditionally associate with White people. Nevertheless, Whiteness is increasingly silenced in this ill-fated environment, which in the textual environment of the novel translates as death. Ern Scat chooses Gebalup as the site from which to carry out his eugenic project of breeding the Native out, but is punished by losing 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 fathers his uncles Jack and Will, develops a serious speech impediment due to lip cancer, ends up with a terribly bloated body, and is eventually killed in rage by his illegitimate son Jack;⁹⁴⁸ the unreliable Patrick Coolman consorts with Harriette's sister Dinah, and perishes on the beach in a devastating storm. Sandy One Mason, precariously inscribed in the White economy as a whaler, carter, shepherd and miner, is the hybrid son of a White sealer and tries to pass into White society, but is punished for this in suffering from tongue cancer, which prevents him from speaking (up) and eventually paralyses him. Harley's troubled father, Tommy Scat, ends up marrying a White woman and forsakes his Native heritage and son Harley in an attempt to pass, which leads to the ill-fated car crash that forever silences the singing potential of his scattling voice. Only Harley is returned from 'death country' and manages to find his own, uncanny voice by recovering his forebears' silenced and hidden Native past on a health-restoring, reconciliatory walkabout away from this doomed 'City of Sin'.

Gebalup's condition as ghost country is uncannily mirrored by the islands in front of the coast at Wirlup Haven, which turn into an oft-cited symbol of death themselves. This is not surprising, as White colonisation took place from the sea, and boats filled with White 'ghosts' were perceived as parts of these islands come loose. Thus, the islands

⁹⁴⁷ 480-1.

⁹⁴⁸ 85. 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 by it in a 'rhizomatic' death of sorts.

become in all sorts of ways associated with the devastating impact of White civilisation. Fanny mentions 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.”⁹⁴⁹ Notably, Wonyin is condemned to exile there after being caught, and his island-jail is intentionally burnt down, destroying most of its life.⁹⁵⁰ Moreover, Sandy One’s mother is taken and raped by a White sealer, and gives birth to him on one of the islands, which associates the origins of Harley’s family with these ill-fated sites. The islands turn into an ominous Gothic symbol of Native destruction for the Nyoongars and such hybrid offspring as the Benang family:

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 own absence. And the island sinking in the rising aftermath of violence.⁹⁵¹

Nevertheless, by their ‘original’ connections to this uncanny liminal geography where life and death circulate through each other, Harley’s family remain strangely intrigued by the sea between the headland and “heartland,”⁹⁵² as islands are called in the Nyoongar language. Indeed, in their fascination a cyclical notion of cultural continuation, change and merger is suggested; it is indicative of the Benang family’s hybridity, and homes in on a sense of performativity through imperfect repetition:⁹⁵³

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.⁹⁵⁴

⁹⁴⁹ 263.

⁹⁵⁰ 470-1.

⁹⁵¹ 284.

⁹⁵² 416.

⁹⁵³ See my discussion of Homi Bhabha’s ideas on colonial mimicry and Judith Butler’s on performativity in chapter 2, pp. 88-94.

⁹⁵⁴ 263.

Not surprisingly, “[t]he ocean was rows of white-haired heads moving toward them, with that quick moment of darkness between each one,”⁹⁵⁵ but Harley comments that “[o]ut there between the headland and the heartland the sea was *grey*...”⁹⁵⁶ Indeed, speaking from the heart/land, it is Harley who learns to come to terms with the land and sea’s features and what they represent in terms of a renewed, hybrid Aboriginal Dreaming, contesting White Myth. His capacity for flight is instrumental for achieving the necessary perspective of the land and sea and for singing their features, so elevation and flight should not be confused with the surveillant ‘cartographic gaze’—male, colonial and possessive.⁹⁵⁷ Neither is it inscribed in uprootedness but rather in a growing, postcolonising Aboriginal 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 ...⁹⁵⁸

As Pablo Armellino argues, 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.⁹⁵⁹

As in *True Country*, Harley’s learning process is channelled through his exposure to death, and it is in the liminal space of the un-dead that he acquires a voice that may reach out to his Indigenous kin and friends. Harley realises that he has much in common

⁹⁵⁵ 264.

⁹⁵⁶ 416 (my emphasis).

⁹⁵⁷ Koch 1998.

⁹⁵⁸ 166.

⁹⁵⁹ Armellino 2007: 28-9.

with his passing ‘octoroon’ great-great-grandfather Sandy One Mason, washed upon shore 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 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.⁹⁶⁰

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-perception as an Aborigine, however uncanny 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.”⁹⁶¹ Harley fully acknowledges he is part-Aboriginal, and it is in Harley’s awareness of this uncanny 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 towards 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 ... [T]here 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

⁹⁶⁰ 494-5.

⁹⁶¹ 343, 386.

something like a million million many-sized hearts beating, and the whispering of waves, leaves, grasses ... We are still here, Benang.⁹⁶²

5.4. Doing Aboriginal Life-Writing: Undoing the Colonial Vampire

At the turn of the 21st century, with *Benang* Scott produces a “shifty, snaking narrative,”⁹⁶³ and configures a subversive origin story as “post-contact Aboriginal Genesis”⁹⁶⁴—as we shall see, qualifications equally applicable to Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria*. *Benang* is diametrically opposed to the inescapable Gothic sense of doom expressed in Mudrooroo’s *Vampire* trilogy, a contemporary instance of life-writing that also uses fiction as the most appropriate way to address the issues of Aboriginality and Australianness. Contrary to the developments in the *Vampire* trilogy, *Benang*’s hybrid male protagonist cum uncanny Aboriginal ghost manages to plot a hopeful inbound journey into Australian heartland and out of Ernest Scatt’s and A. O. Neville’s ‘death country’. As such, *Benang* reflects the capacity for Native resistance and survival despite the damage inflicted by racialist thinking in Australian mainstream society in the 20th century. Thus, the novel’s *palimpsest* of (song)lines is rooted/routed in a multiplicity of hidden tracks that resist White civilisation’s *tabula-rasa* imprint as manifested through 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.⁹⁶⁵

The regenerative politics of *True Country* are inscribed in an agenda of Indigenous revitalisation, using the textual spaces opened up for a development of Indigeneity by Aborigine-inclusive multiculturalism and Native-Title legislation in the early 1990s, which results in Billy’s success in configuring an Indigenous identity at the end of the novel. *Benang*, however, is scripted into the conservative backlash under the Howard

⁹⁶² 496-7.

⁹⁶³ 24.

⁹⁶⁴ Fielder 2006: 7.

⁹⁶⁵ 359.

government by problematising the issue of Aboriginal identity where *True Country*'s protagonist, Billy, leaves off. No doubt the result of many years of research and writing, *Benang*'s publication was timely in that it intervened in the shifty language and politics surrounding the debate of the Stolen Generations, whose plight had come to the nation's full attention after a voluminous government report in 1997. Similarly, John Fielder argues that:

It is daring of Scott to reanimate the absorptionist line of thinking in his second novel *Benang*, even if he is using colonialist discourses against themselves. For Scott, this is a risky enterprise, as he plays with the way he, and many others, are the historical products of such policies, practices, ideologies ... 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.⁹⁶⁶

Benang, therefore, offers a benign script to Australia's large part-Indigenous population in that it returns them to Australian territory by powerfully adapting the Gothic and Magic Realism for Native purposes into Postcolonising Dreaming Narrative.

Benang makes a necessary incursion into the Australian text-scape by proffering Harley's White hybridity as the haunting, uncanny sign of cultural difference, encrypted as problematic and vexed at the novel's beginning. However, by laying bare the uncanny distortions, lies, gaps and silences in government and personal files, the text becomes the liminal space from which Aboriginality 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 the *Benang* that his Aboriginal self is "still here, however too-well disguised."⁹⁶⁷ As Scott writes himself:

⁹⁶⁶ Fielder 2006: 5.

⁹⁶⁷ 496.

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 is able to convince and communicate to an audience a 'true' history, and his undeniably Indigenous identity.⁹⁶⁸

Like Sandy One, Harley is an “original”⁹⁶⁹ of sorts who defies limiting conceptions of Aboriginality in terms of pristine authenticity, and traces new paths to understanding Australian identity against persisting 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.”⁹⁷⁰

Nurturing the seeds planted in *True Country*, *Benang* proposes a vindication of new forms of Aboriginality and story-telling through a postcolonising, performative openness and fuzziness of identity and genre which is both defamiliarising and frightening. Binary conceptions of Aboriginality and Australianness are interrogated by blurring underlying fixities of class, race and gender; hence, the semi-autobiographical quest novel or *Bildungsroman* is gothicised into an uncanny shaman/djanak version of Aboriginal life-writing. By uprooting and confusing the objective linearity of realist prose:

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

⁹⁶⁸ 5.

⁹⁶⁹ 493. In the novel the term “original” is applied to Sandy One by White settlers, in reference to his belonging to the area.

⁹⁷⁰ Slater 2006: 63.

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 established symbolic economy, but rather prevents interpretation.⁹⁷¹

In creating a proliferation of new, hybrid bodies that cannot be contained by Manichean interpretations of identity, the text eventually remodels the vampiric from a more enabling site for Native survival than Mudrooroo's fictions can be seen to configure. Thus, by priming land over blood, Harley counters Ern and Amelia, both White, colonial and oedipal.

Harley becomes the uncanny, embarrassing and discomfiting story-teller who with "shrill"⁹⁷² piercing voice sings a new world into place, firmly embedded in the family's particular Aboriginal 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."⁹⁷³ The curlew is the Benang family's uncanny 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 Aboriginal bird announcing Nan's death in *My Place* and Sally's inscription into Aboriginality. However, the haunting call of Mudrooroo's vampiric bat woman in his *Vampire* trilogy writes the hybrid protagonist George⁹⁷⁴ out of Indigeneity and announces Native death. Not surprisingly, therefore, Mudrooroo's 'promised land' does not seem to be located in Australia—at least not as an Aborigine—although he has purportedly returned from Nepal to Queensland in retirement. Contrary to 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,⁹⁷⁵ which emulates *My Place's* process of genealogical recovery through the mother-figure. Thus, the key to *Benang's* benign understanding of a vital proliferation of hybrid bodies is their matrilineal inscription in the Australian land, embracing and empowering:

⁹⁷¹ Slater 2006: 71-2 (my emphasis).

⁹⁷² 386.

⁹⁷³ 9-10.

⁹⁷⁴ George is one of the two manifestations of Mudrooroo's identity in the series that uncannily circulates through the African Wadawaka's.

⁹⁷⁵ 51.

The land, not the book or the English language, becomes the site from which all life is generated. Despite the colonizers' desire to contain life within the limits of Western reason and textuality, and the possibility that they might have achieved, on paper, their desire to reduce multiplicity to sameness, the idea that the land is the creative force, and that people are but one manifestation of the land, is constituted from the stories that people tell and the styles in which they tell them.⁹⁷⁶

In configuring the land as a generative text-scape, *Benang* participates in a discursive politics of identity building by revealing how “language does not reflect but creates the world.”⁹⁷⁷ In the 2001 Alfred Deakin Lectures,⁹⁷⁸ Kim Scott addressed the enduring pernicious effects of the creation of a White Australia through the assimilative politics of eugenic 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? Australia for the white man! Terra nullius, and the first white man born. In the context of such government departments and policy even the title ‘Aboriginal reconciliation’ becomes a problem. Why is the title only Aboriginal reconciliation? Come to that, what is it that Aboriginal people should reconcile ourselves to? The way things are? The 1967 referendum was hailed as a breakthrough; the citizens of Australia agreed that Aboriginal people—a very small percentage of the population after all—may also become citizens, may also be people with rights. Subject, of course, to

⁹⁷⁶ Slater 2006: 64-5.

⁹⁷⁷ Slater 2005b: 157.

⁹⁷⁸ 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: “Alfred Deakin (1856 -1919) was Australia's second Prime Minister. He was a man of letters, steeped in philosophy and literature and deeply spiritual. Most Australians would no longer share Deakin's views about race and Empire, views that were typical of his generation. Many contemporary Australians however would continue to share Deakin's social vision, for it was Alfred Deakin, above all, who instituted the uniquely Australian idea of the ‘fair go’, and put in place much of Australia's political and social infrastructure. In May 2001, 53 people from Australia and overseas came together and presented their ideas about the nature and future of a civil society, to honour the Deakin legacy, his role as nation-builder and his openness to the world of ideas” (See Works Cited: “The Alfred Deakin Lectures”).

certain conditions... 1967. That's long after the nation was formed. It's almost two hundred years after invasion. It seems, at the very least, a reluctant and petulant admission. And Native title: so late to recognise that Indigenous people had, and in some cases still have, ownership and common-law rights to land. But even then it was necessary to tinker with the law. Insecurity, uncertainty, doubt. I still often hear that phrase surrounding Native Title discussions, and purportedly it's used in reference to economic contracts. But I don't think it's that. No, it's insecurity, uncertainty and doubt about something more important than that. Much deeper. 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*'?⁹⁷⁹

Benang textualises the Native life experience through the re/generative qualities of Harley's 'singing', whose polyphony, non-linear organisation of plot and time, and use of association and metaphor configure a postcolonising, hybrid counter-discourse. The primacy of Native singing over non-Native writing while using English constitutes an uncanny narrative ritual which renews the Aboriginal inscription of the land. This revitalising ritual unmasks the politics behind the creation of the *Terra Nullius* myth as the imposition of the assimilative Imperial worldview, and, as in *True Country*, uncannily re/creates the Aboriginal universe through merging *tabula rasa* with *palimpsest* narrative.

This re/creation necessarily takes issue with common images that address the increased Whitening of Native culture, such as the repetitive uncanny mirror scenes in which Harley, Kathleen and Topsy contemplate the traces of their hybridity⁹⁸⁰—"The mirror, that mirror mirror ... Who's the fairest of them all?"⁹⁸¹ Perhaps quite hidden to the mainstream reader, *Benang* also cyclically repeats oblique metaphors to underline the innovative performative character of Indigenised textual production. Such metaphors are imbued with varying meaning, and thus work towards a combination of continuation and change—of new life that develops its ever-changing, multifarious manifestations out of

⁹⁷⁹ Scott 2001. The paradigm of Native/non-Native 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. Significantly for the problems surrounding the mainstream relation with the Indigenous population, this apology was a moving though largely symbolic affair, with no programme of economic and social aid attached to improve the structurally underprivileged situation of many Aborigines.

⁹⁸⁰ 14, 160, 163, 371.

⁹⁸¹ 160.

steady roots. The horizontal, rhizomatic flow of the text is interrupted at different points by the vertical ‘slashes’ of non-Native cords and ribbons, these, in turn, are mirrored in the shreds of bark peeling from Native paperbark trees.

The attractive colours of the 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 civilisation, are connected to the violent frontier justice wielded against the Nyoongars, and used to abduct, seduce and rape Native 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.⁹⁸²

A non-patriarchal, non-Western inscription of the Aboriginal narrative requires a Native support for textuality. The solution is to be found in a rhizomatic reversal of the paper-making process that out of the destruction of trees produces the thin, insubstantial White surfaces on which the West’s History of Progress and Imperial Expansion is written. Thus, Harley’s remedy is to respect these trees from the life-sustaining root level up and gather into ‘paper talk’ the multiple paperbark strips they shred as a gift bestowed upon his quest for healing scraps of regenerative communication with the land.

The latter train of associations can also be inferred from Scott’s words in *Kayang and Me*:

The usual Noongar word for paper is *bibool*, taken from one dialect’s word for the paperbark tree. Paperbark trees often stand beside *bily*, our dialect’s word for river, which is almost the same as the word for navel. The earth around them is called *boodjar*, and to be pregnant is to be *boodjari*, Whichever way we put it, writing—to be a writer—is to offer sustenance and life.⁹⁸³

⁹⁸² 400, 469, 491.

⁹⁸³ 257.

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 if ribbons from ceilings: “I well remember that roadside stop, for its silence particularly. We had a thin fire going, and were in a grove of Yate trees. The ground was dark and cool beneath us. I remember noticing how the bark peeled back from the upper branches, so close above our heads.”⁹⁸⁴ Following the path indicated by his uncles’ songlines along these spots of shelter, Harley eventually traces his way back to Fanny’s inscription into 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.⁹⁸⁵

As with identity, writing is a never-ending performative process of rehearsing, producing, revising, polishing and adapting, but dues must always be paid as the script develops and unfolds. Not surprisingly, Scott dedicates *Benang* to the women in his life, “as my wife and mother advise,”⁹⁸⁶ and 2005 saw the publication of his family story from the perspective of his aunt and Nyoongar Elder, Kayang Hazel Brown. A reconfiguration of Gothic writing as Maban singing becomes the performative, promiscuous tool to forge new, hybrid identity inscriptions that undercut White male notions of Aboriginality as (post)colonial underclass. They allow vast numbers of part-Aborigines to repopulate and re-territorialise the Australian land and textscape, and proliferate in defiance of the eugenic policies and language of dispossession, dislocation

⁹⁸⁴ 382.

⁹⁸⁵ 473-4 (my emphasis). Scott’s references to paperbark and papertalk are significant in that they ring back to the uncanny work and person of Mudrooroo. Colin Johnson renamed himself Mudrooroo, Nyoongar for ‘paperbark’, in 1988, the year of the Bicentennial. In 1990 he co-edited the volume *Paperbark, a Collection of Black Australian Writings* 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.

⁹⁸⁶ 502.

and removal that have vampirised so many into a false sense of Whiteness, if not literally exterminated.

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 Aboriginal belonging which allows him "to show ... where and who we are."⁹⁸⁷ Having learnt to speak from the heart/land, his success as an Aborigine is given by his failure as a White Man. His Aboriginal elevation ironically emulates the eugenic motto "to uplift a despised race", but re-roots the vampiric into Native Australian soil rather than proposing an Indigenous hunger for 'White blood'. The latter, together with his capacity to generate Aboriginal corporality through his singing, turns him into a benign manifestation of the Aboriginal Dreaming rather than an Indigenous Count Dracula. As argued in the previous chapter, Mudrooroo has ultimately fallen prey to an exclusionary notion of identity heavily promoted by himself as self-appointed spokesman of the Nyoongar and Aboriginal 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'."⁹⁸⁸ He also addresses Mudrooroo's plight in *Kayang and Me*, pointing out that his Aboriginal identity is still a matter of debate amongst Nyoongars. Scott understands Indigenous writers who "advocate ... exclud[ing non-Natives] back—to show them how it feels" and thus create an exclusionary sense of Indigenous solidarity; yet, he does not sympathise with this stance in view of his own, uncanny life experience as an "anomalous", White-skinned, urban professional Aborigine.⁹⁸⁹

Intent upon creating inclusive forms of Aboriginality— which, all must be said, are needed to accommodate his own identity—Scott rather believes that an exclusionary politics of the Native body would be counterproductive in the face of the inevitability of hybridisation and the redefinition of Australianness at large. As he is aware that he writes "for a predominantly white, educated audience,"⁹⁹⁰ *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."⁹⁹¹ Naturally, Scott wants

⁹⁸⁷ 452, 456.

⁹⁸⁸ Scott 2007: 5.

⁹⁸⁹ Scott & Brown 2005: 204-5.

⁹⁹⁰ Midalia 2005.

⁹⁹¹ Slater 2005b: 157.

“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.⁹⁹²

Scott’s words are tantamount to saying that any adherence to the blood question is not a biological but political issue embedded within 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 a Native heritage for the greater good of the Australian nation. It is as if the changes in the political context of Aboriginality induced by Mabo, Native Title, Reconciliation/Apology and The Stolen Generations have reversed the thrust of White vampiric infection and proliferation, and gothicised/empowered Aboriginal ‘blood’ as the only remedy to return colour and life to the land; as Scott argues, nowadays a single drop of Aboriginal blood is enough to make one Aboriginal, but the opposite no longer holds. This takes us back to how the work that Sally Morgan has done for the Native community over the last two decades may undo a feeble genetic starting point of Indigenous belonging, reminiscent of Scott’s own,⁹⁹³ while an author like Mudrooroo finds himself excluded despite an Aboriginal life experience and important contribution to the Native cause in critical and fictional work. In such a strategic employment of identity politics the uncanny situation may obtain that an ostensibly light-skinned person is considered Aboriginal but a dark-skinned person may not—a situation which deconstructs the category of race in its blurring of colour distinctions. This paradox is rooted in “a position of *temporary* closure of Nyoongar

⁹⁹² Scott & Brown 2005: 207 (my emphasis).

⁹⁹³ Buck 2001.

identity, whilst also insisting on differentiation.”⁹⁹⁴ The latter is, as Lisa Slater argues, precisely the uncanny minority space Scott writes from, which defies the eugenic language of racial differentiation by using it against itself, and produces a new, postcolonising, 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.⁹⁹⁵ As Lisa Slater holds, “Scott is suggesting that liberation can only be ‘discovered’ through an ethical engagement with strangers—the stranger self.”⁹⁹⁶ It is an uncanny yet productive:

... encounter with the other whereby their radical alterity cannot be reduced to one’s knowing ... Thus, 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 other for our self. Hence, the ethical moment ruptures the self from self-understanding and causes anguish. The world is beyond our comprehension, yet we are reliant upon it and those who dwell in it for our subjectivity. 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.⁹⁹⁷

Therefore, the uncanny 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 life-writing refuses to acknowledge a White patriarchal narrative that organises kinship relations according to the hierarchical rigidities and sequencing of oedipal conflict; instead, it simultaneously speaks to the past, present and future of Aboriginality from a hybrid site that is enabling, inclusive, nurturing and

⁹⁹⁴ Slater 2005a: 70 (my emphasis).

⁹⁹⁵ Buck 2001.

⁹⁹⁶ Slater 2003: 369.

⁹⁹⁷ Slater 2005b: 148-9.

regenerative, in ways that Sally Morgan's instance of life-writing and *True Country* already rehearsed some years earlier:

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.⁹⁹⁸

As such, Scott's an uncanny hybrid fiction is a form of Postcolonising Dreaming Narrative that rekindles Native memory by forging counter-narrative as counter-history; it constitutes a form of literary 'black' magic that reworks Indigenous traditions into empowering new literary form and content:

Benang is influenced, I believe, by aspects of traditional story telling methods; the place, teller and listener determine what is told first, it uses rhythm and repetition etc. This is especially important rather than the story being structured according to chronology, which of course lends itself to such linear notions as 'progress', and 'social evolution'.⁹⁹⁹

Benang may therefore be understood to rewrite on a grand, epic scale an old family story that the novel places in Aunt Harriette's custody, which roots Scott's 'family history' even more firmly into matrilineal inscription. Aunt Harriette tells Harley about the curlew, the shy, Indigenous bird which symbolises the qualities of the Benang mob.¹⁰⁰⁰ Significantly, as a wading bird the curlew bridges between land and water, mirroring the origins of Harley's family, and, in its further connections to the frontier

⁹⁹⁸ Fielder 2006: 7.

⁹⁹⁹ Kunhikrishnan 2006.

¹⁰⁰⁰ Scott 2003: 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 2005: 25).

massacre at Gebalup and the regenerating capacity of water, it is uncannily 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 Postcolonising Dreaming Narrative. Perhaps contrary to the mainstream readership's expectations of Gothic narrative, this "deathbird's" haunting, awe-inspiring cry from uncanny places of hiding exhorts Harley (and Scott) to "[r]emember" and "hold yourself proud. You are as good as anyone, better."¹⁰⁰¹

¹⁰⁰¹ Scott 2003: 287.

Chapter 6

“We’re of One Heartbeat”: Postcolonising Dreaming Narrative in Alexis Wright’s Fiction

*“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”*

(Alexis Wright quoted in O’Brien 2007: 218)

6.1. Taking the Snake out of the Hole

Alexis Wright (1950) pertains, together with Kim Scott (1957), to a group of Indigenous authors who create a sense of Indigenous belonging by setting their writing in their traditional homelands. She started publishing later than her generational peer Sally Morgan (1951), and was thus warned against the dangers of authentication hovering over autobiographical life-writing, she—as well as Scott—resorts to fiction as a safer and more effective way of reflecting on issues of Indigeneity.¹⁰⁰² Couched by her Native community, with whom her family never lost contact, Wright shows herself less influenced by an individual search for and journey into a lost but retrievable Aboriginal identity than Kim Scott or Sally Morgan (or, in a warped sense, Mudrooroo). Inscribed in an agenda of communal self-determination and self-definition, Wright’s fiction becomes the truth mode which refuses exposure of her own Indigenous identity to mainstream scrutiny, which she understands as invasive and harmful.¹⁰⁰³ Instead, she proposes the critical assessment of the general state of Aboriginality in contemporary Australia from the larger point of view of community and country. *Plains of Promise* is still tainted by “[t]he focus ... in much earlier Indigenous women’s fiction ... on the secret of sexual abuse of Aboriginal women by white men, for which the former were treated as somehow responsible.”¹⁰⁰⁴ While this may lead to vexed searches for personal identity such as in Sally Morgan’s *My Place*, the autobiographical element of this issue is no

¹⁰⁰² See for instance Ravenscroft 1998: 75.

¹⁰⁰³ Idem.

¹⁰⁰⁴ Ferrier 2008: 45.

longer addressed in *Plains of Promise*, and the issue disappears altogether from *Carpentaria*.

As a fourth-generation victim of geographical displacement and dispossession, Wright finds her political agenda and narrative strategies on a Native ancestry and rootedness in traditional country that finds ample support in her own community but whose continuity is still being challenged in contemporary mainstream society.¹⁰⁰⁵ The shared history of oppression and genocide that gives shape to the present of Australian Aborigines constitutes her writing as a reflection of the communal universe of the Waanyi people and their epistemological bind with the Southern Gulf of Carpentaria in Northern Queensland, the land of their Dreaming. This takes her prose—even more so than Scott’s—out of the realm of auto/biographical experience. Thus, regarding her first novel, *Plains of Promise* (1997), she said in a 1997 interview:

I guess the novel 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. I also thought, when I started, that it was a way of bringing some attention to the area. Then it was one of the more neglected and isolated parts of Australia ... we don't have any access to traditional lands, we still don't. Not just my family but most Waanji people because the lands are all owned by CRA and remain so under the mining agreement.¹⁰⁰⁶

Nevertheless, to grasp the width and depth of the issues addressed in her two novels, it is useful to place Alexis Wright within her own family background, which can only be understood within the larger framework of contact history with White settlers and the resulting disruption of Aboriginal tribal tissue through dispossession, removal, displacement and genocide. Wright traces her lineage back to her great-grandmother,

¹⁰⁰⁵ Neo-conservatives come to mind, but the Aboriginal scholar Marcia Langton also takes issue with the traditional left: “I can seldom find an audience to speak to about the stranger-than-fiction situations I encounter in a deeply racist settler state that denies its own racism. It is rare to find people who respond knowingly to my tales of disturbing encounters with liberal-minded or leftist suburban Australian intellectuals who claim to support Aboriginal people and yet are entrenched in Enlightenment ways of thinking about us as savages on the edge of civilisation ... Because the Australian Left seldom strays beyond the comfort of the cities, it has minimal impact on the complex problems of Aboriginal life of the twenty-first century” (2001: 75).

¹⁰⁰⁶ Finnane 1997. 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 for encroaching upon Aboriginal territory and denying Indigenous land rights, which was echoed in a national 1981 car bumper sticker campaign by the Aboriginal Information Centre which read “Don’t CRAp on our land!” (see Works Cited: “The Gulliver CRA Dossier”).

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 19th century colonialist growth of the pastoral industry in Queensland, which dispossessed and pushed local Aborigines, amongst whom the Waanyi, from their traditional lands.¹⁰⁰⁷ As his diary and other historical records testify, Frank Hahn was notorious for violent conduct against the Natives, and Wright does not deem 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 as a sexual slave too: “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.’¹⁰⁰⁸

In time, Hahn passed Wright’s great-grandmother, Opal Marinmarn, on to his cook, a Chinese labourer 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.¹⁰⁰⁹ This leads to a large amount of more and less formalized bonds with Aboriginal 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,¹⁰¹⁰ which turned 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:

[b]y 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,

¹⁰⁰⁷ Anna Haebich speaks of the Stolen Generations as “the common practices of segregation, removal, institutionalisation, indenturing, fostering and adoption of Aboriginal children” (2000). 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.

¹⁰⁰⁸ Vernay 2004: 119. Sally Morgan’s (auto)biography is pivoted on the practice of black velvet; Wright also presents it as a key issue in understanding the female protagonists’ plight in *Plains of Promise*.

¹⁰⁰⁹ Ganter 1998: 18. South Sea Islanders were called “Kanaka” in Australia. They were often indentured or, worse, worked in conditions of slavery after having been kidnapped or ‘blackbirded’ as this was called.

¹⁰¹⁰ The Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897 and its 1901 amendment.

and supervision of employment by means of a permit ... [T]he Aboriginal Protection bureaucracy ... made it its task to decide in each case whether a marriage was morally desirable.¹⁰¹¹

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 onto Australian Society; this immigration law limited Asian-Pacific access to the island-continent and ran parallel to White intents to curb the presence of its Aboriginal 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—amongst whom Wright's grandmother—to stay after Opal's insistent pleading.¹⁰¹²

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 of Alexis Wright's direct forbears' kind 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 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.¹⁰¹³

Thus, mainstream policies would necessarily and directly affect Wright's forbears. Wright's maternal grandmother, whose ambiguous inscription in Australian society is

¹⁰¹¹ Ganter 1998: 14, 17.

¹⁰¹² Vernay 2004: 119. Wright 2001a: 230.

¹⁰¹³ Ganter 1998: 36.

uncannily reflected in her triple naming as Dolly Quinsen, Granny Ah Kup and Grandma Nulayanma,¹⁰¹⁴ was still 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.”¹⁰¹⁵ 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, “[t]he 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.” 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.”¹⁰¹⁶

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 Aboriginal genocide and restrictive immigration policies determines the interplay between 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 Aboriginal children to become failures right from the moment we first walked into the classroom.”¹⁰¹⁷ 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,”¹⁰¹⁸ she was imbued with Dolly’s love for story-telling 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 acquaint through a creative use of her imagination:

¹⁰¹⁴ Wright 2001a: 224, 239.

¹⁰¹⁵ Vernay 2004: 119.

¹⁰¹⁶ Wright 2001a: 232-3, 224.

¹⁰¹⁷ Wright 2002: 11.

¹⁰¹⁸ Wright 2001a: 224.

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 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.¹⁰¹⁹

Through this awareness of dispossession, Wright also learnt to “imagine the facts about [her] family” despite its silence and shame about the past:

There were things that happened in our family when the white cattle men came to our traditional lands that were never explained ... So 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.¹⁰²⁰

Yet, it was only in her activist years for the Aboriginal cause, during which she worked extensively in government departments and Aboriginal agencies across four states and the Northern Territory as a professional manager, educator, researcher and writer, that she was taught the patience to write from traditional leaders. It was in these circles “where she got the gift for learning and an education,” which later took her to Melbourne’s RMIT university to pursue her calling through media studies and creative writing courses.¹⁰²¹ In sum, Alexis Wright’s incursions into writing have developed out

¹⁰¹⁹ Wright 1998b.

¹⁰²⁰ Wright 2002: 10 (my emphasis).

¹⁰²¹ Wright 2002: 11.

of a matrilineal heritage of myth, memory and story-telling and a long-standing professional commitment with the Indigenous cause which respond to a political agenda of native recovery and self-determination:

I, and many of my cousins grew up with the vision Grandma instilled in us of our traditional country ... In many of us, Grandma's vision is still firmly planted in our minds and 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.¹⁰²²

Having dedicated many years to project work for and management of Aboriginal organisations, between 1997 and 1998 Wright emerged powerfully onto the Australian writing scene with the publication of two non-fiction works, *Grog War* (1997) and *Take Power: Like This Old Man Here* (1998), and the novel *Plains of Promise* (1997). Following Aboriginal protocol regarding traditional ownership, the author only wrote *Grog War* and *Take Power* after an invitation issued by other local Aboriginal organisations to deal with socio-political issues relating to their communities.¹⁰²³ *Grog War* was commissioned by the Julalikari Council for the Warumungu people of Tennant Creek in the Northern Territory, and documents their successful bet for Aboriginal self-management of the alcohol problem that threatened to devastate the community in the 1990s. Michelle Grossman describes *Grog War* as “a groundbreaking materialist study of the ways in which the politics of the drink itself are embedded in and sustained by the uneven structures of power and polity in local Australian contexts.” It charts “the vested interests of white Territorians for whom the economic exploitation of local Aboriginal peoples has been a long-standing feature of social and political profiteering.”¹⁰²⁴ In language that homes in on the uncanny, Wright considers *Grog War* a “hidden history” of

¹⁰²² Wright 2001a: 240.

¹⁰²³ Wright 1998b.

¹⁰²⁴ Grossman 1998: 82-3.

“angry hornets inside Pandora’s box,”¹⁰²⁵ which defamiliarises White versions of contact history. On the other hand, *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 onto paper a series of accounts for which fellow Indigenous people “were not able to find the words.”¹⁰²⁶

Nevertheless, creative writing is already tentatively put to use in *Grog War*. It mixes “factual account ... with the story of a fictional Aboriginal family”¹⁰²⁷ so as to offer protection to the Native community and not to further disrupt the already tense cross-cultural relationships between White and black locals.¹⁰²⁸ Fiction therefore seems a logical step into a safer and more effective way of communicating an Aboriginal perception of history, place and identity to her own and other Aboriginal communities and the mainstream. In a 1998 interview, Wright claims that:

There are a lot of things that need to be said to the country and I found fiction was one way of saying them without exposing people from my traditional area to the kind of scrutiny that a conventional story would have risked. There are a lot of people of our mothers’ generation, the older people of the communities, who have gone through terrible times ... They don’t want to be reminded of the past because so much was destroyed. And there’s a lot of shame associated with those terrible times. How can you find a way to disclose these experiences ... in a non-fiction form?¹⁰²⁹

The latter question proves largely rhetorical, as she had already chosen fiction as the primary means to explore themes of history, place and the land, “partly because I feel that if I tried to write the real story, I would fail.”¹⁰³⁰ Fictional truth is not to be understood as a return to 19th c. Realism. In a 2002 essay, she elaborates this notion as follows:

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 ...*

¹⁰²⁵ O’Brien 2007: 219.

¹⁰²⁶ Wright 1998b.

¹⁰²⁷ Wright 1997a: ix.

¹⁰²⁸ Wright 1998b.

¹⁰²⁹ Ravenscroft 1998: 75; see also Wright 2001: 225-6.

¹⁰³⁰ Wright 1998b.

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 ... We have a total colonial history of genocidal acts which spurs on *our desperate need to write to give this country a memory* ... Racism is strong in this country ... This country too, just as Germany did after the war, wants to forget the past, scrub it from the history books ... I see similar processes happening today where words are being used as weapons to flog Aboriginal people—words like ‘practical reconciliation’, ‘mutual responsibility’, ‘incremental improvement’, ‘assimilation’—in denial of Indigenous rights, *denial of history*, and decades of denial of essential services for our communities. All of these actions convert into cutting the wound deeper in the present day wretched reality of the lives of our people, which translates into a continuation of the massacre of Aboriginal people by ensuring that they continue living unhealthy, sad and degraded lives, and go to an early grave. This is the price we pay for being *un-Australian*, for wanting recognition of words like multi-culturalism, stolen generations, treaties, Aboriginal government, Aboriginal sovereignty, Aboriginal self-determination.¹⁰³¹

Additionally, Wright highlights that the process of Native Title is harder in Queensland than elsewhere,¹⁰³² and laments the difficulties of retrieving traditional

¹⁰³¹ Wright 2002: 13-5 (my emphasis).

¹⁰³² The historian Anna Haebich corroborates the resistance of successive Queensland governments to introduce less repressive policies regarding its Aboriginal population. In the post-war period, Aboriginal assimilation into the mainstream was nationally promoted over institutionalised racism, segregation and discrimination as the means to manage the ‘Aboriginal problem’. From subsisting on public welfare until their ultimate disappearance—as was commonly believed was their destiny—the Aborigines should turn into responsible, economically-independent citizens, enjoying universal citizenship rights with their fellow Australians. While Native entitlement to difference, and hence special rights and treatment was denied, this policy was deemed progressive for its time, and Federal Minister for Territories Paul Hasluck (in office 1951-1963) became the main artifice to introduce the new, liberal attitude in the legislation of the federal states (2008: 182, 195). Haebich points 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. This reflected the state’s long history of ruthless repression of Aboriginal people, epitomised in its colonial Native Police force. It also favoured strict racial segregation and vigorously opposed the policy of absorption adopted at the 1937 national conference in Canberra, and it dragged its feet over assimilation, supporting an extensive network of segregated community institutions (nine missions and five government settlements) that held over 40 per cent of the state’s estimated Aboriginal

country: “Once you get back your traditional land, you also need to live there, and unless you get some support from the government, it’s very difficult to create a home on that land. Most of the Aborigines in our country are poverty stricken.”¹⁰³³ Bearing in mind how Wright goes about the charting and re-imagining of her family’s and wider Native community’s history in the face of mainstream reception, her fiction therefore inscribes itself into a recovery of Aboriginality, a kind of *spiritual* Native title that has little in common with depoliticised New Age philosophies of a healing reconnection between human beings and country. Rather, it is wrapped up in an uncanny political project of revealing silenced, hidden knowledge regarding Aboriginal dispossession and genocide whose potential harmful and dangerous effects for the Native community are reverted to the mainstream. By addressing, denouncing and discomforting the mainstream with uneasy historic truths enhanced by the creative imagination, the Native community is offered the possibility of their controlled use and management. This, in fact, calls to mind Freud’s account of the increased possibility for the uncanny to appear in fiction.¹⁰³⁴ 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 ...”¹⁰³⁵ Within this uncanny agenda, *Plains of Promise* marked Wright’s first full-fledged incursion into the genre of the novel, which met with mixed reviews on its publication in 1997.

6.2. A Torn Homeland: Plains of Promise or Plains of Papery Grass?

Not surprisingly in the light of the previous, *Plains of Promise* reads as a general metaphor for the possibilities of Aboriginal 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

population of 19,500. The Director of Native Affairs Office invested heavily in this gulag—two-thirds of its annual revenue of £1.6 million in 1960 alone. Despite this expenditure, historian Ros Kidd has demonstrated that conditions there were generally appalling and contributed to endemic levels of Aboriginal ill-health. This vast sum of money (compared to expenditure in other states) was drawn largely from forced deductions of Aboriginal wages. The Queensland government acted as an employment broker, hiring out workers for low wages and paying workers on its own settlements minimal amounts, and was not keen to give up this revenue-raising venture” (2008: 198-9).

¹⁰³³ Vernay 2004: 119.

¹⁰³⁴ See chapter 2, pp.43-4.

¹⁰³⁵ Wright 2002: 18.

country the novel configures.¹⁰³⁶ *Plains of Promise* traces the lives of three generations of Aboriginal ‘half-caste’ women from the 1940s to the 1990s in the light of their connection to the nurturing core of the Gulf Country in Northern Queensland. Wright explains this vital link as follows:

To be a member of an Aboriginal nation in Australia means that we are tied to a specific geographical traditional landscape which is alive with the powers of our spiritual ancestors. Then, in this landscape we are tied to particular areas on the ancestral dreaming tracks of the creators of our cultural landscape. This ancient geography is the source of our laws, language and culture and responsibilities. Our laws are based on respect and understanding, and as the world’s oldest civilisation this is the way it has been from time immemorial.¹⁰³⁷

As may be expected, the novel precisely 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, sexual and domestic slavery, and fostering out of women of mixed Native ancestry:

I want the truth to be told, our truths, so, first and foremost, I hold my pen for the suffering in our communities ... What I try to do in my writing is make some sense of our world, the stupidity of it, the despair of it, and create a record of it. In ... *Plains of Promise* ... I was concerned with what happens when you cannot crawl out of the pile at the bottom of the barrel. What

¹⁰³⁶ *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 Wright’s great-grandmother’s mishaps: “The large number of children that came from these liaisons were considered good assets towards the future workforce in these isolated places. Tied to the cattle station owner, there would nowhere else for them to go. They were a social minority which would be hard pushed to find acceptance elsewhere ... The history of these cattle stations was forged by Aboriginal men and women who lived in slavery, bound to the most uncivilised and cruellest people their world had ever known. Those enslaved were the Aborigines who had escaped the white man’s bullet, his whip, his butchering and trophy collections—the sets of severed ears decorating the lounge-room wall. There was the Aboriginal girl, not killed with all the others, young enough to tame, brought back to the property to work. ‘Strap her to a tree and leave here [*sic*] there until she’s tame enough to start’ ... Nowadays, there were more Aboriginal people who could claim Chinese blood in the Gulf country than there were white. The Gulf was filled with Aboriginal Chinese families, a kaleidoscope of colours between black and brown” (Wright 1997b: 13-4).

¹⁰³⁷ Wright 2001a: 35.

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?¹⁰³⁸

The title *Plains of Promise* therefore carries ironic undertones, and 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 Aboriginal communities who have traditionally inhabited this domain.¹⁰³⁹ Starting the narrative with a nameless mother, the possibilities for Native recovery and survival in the face of various forms of Aboriginal 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 being the unknowing carriers of a powerful Dreaming secret that has been transmitted along the female family line from generation to generation. A Biblical image of the 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 Aboriginal 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 traditionally-owned Gulf land. Wright problematises the role of gender in a politics of Aboriginal survival by proffering Jessie as a dark, uncanny female incarnation of the Saviour, while critically engaging with issues of responsibility, blame and guilt in the process of hybridisation 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,"¹⁰⁴⁰ its end apparently offers little hope for the future. Indeed, the short, precarious reunion of Ivy, Mary and Jessie on the dry and barren "plains of papery grasses"¹⁰⁴¹ 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 dead-end, sad finale is uncannily offset by an opaque, ambiguous Dreaming story of origins and cyclical

¹⁰³⁸ Wright 1998b.

¹⁰³⁹ Vernay 2004: 121.

¹⁰⁴⁰ Vernay 2004: 121.

¹⁰⁴¹ Wright 1997b: 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).

regeneration on the very last pages, which concurs 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, male account of Eve's sin and her expulsion from sacred ground.

Wright contextualises the emotional and political drift of her first novel as follows:

By the time I had come to making the decision to write a novel in the 1990s, I guess it was at a time of deep inner personal crisis I was experiencing about everything I had ever believed in about our rights as people. I was questioning the failures of our hopes for just about everything we fought for. Every idea and goal was overtaken by others. Governments found new ways of making our lives harder. We did not seem to gel as a political movement at either the national, state or regional level. As individuals, as communities, as peoples with Indigenous rights, *everything* we did to accomplish anything seem [*sic*] to be a meaningless exercise because the force of ingrained, inherited racism stood against us. I wrote *Plains of Promise* to deal with my inner crisis and loneliness of the soul. Writing was 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.¹⁰⁴²

Clearly, the author refers to 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. Wright's personal perception of the state of Aboriginality and its political context in the 1990s is bleak and 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 may one cope with the text's uncanny content?

¹⁰⁴² Wright 2002: 12.

6.2.1. Ivy: poison or antidote?

While an Aboriginal epistemology foregrounds the intricate interconnection between the Australian land and its flora, fauna, and Indigenous peoples,¹⁰⁴³ in *Plains of Promise* nature tends to convey gloomy connotations for the Aboriginal community, in uncanny images that alienate it from country. Imported trees are a recurrent, dark symbol of Western imposition and disruption in the novel: the Kennedy's Station in Ivy's traditional country boasts "a charred skeleton tree, once a giant cedar," hinting at the Aboriginal family's adaptation to White society; as the mental institution's name Sycamore Heights betrays, sycamores and oaks are plentiful on its premises; and the jacaranda at Bessie's homestead, where Ivy stays after her dismissal from the mental institution, only comes into flower after the shed has been destroyed by a thunderstorm.¹⁰⁴⁴ As to birds, on his second return journey from the Great Lake, Elliot is joined again by bush pigeons, which enact a metaphor of the upheaval caused by Native displacement. The image conjured up by "the dismal dispersion of the flock" of doves presages doom:

Far from their northern breeding grounds, desperate pairs of these birds worked on their private courtship, crushed beside each other up and down the shoreline: eggs without nests appeared all over the ground ... All the eggs in this insane hatchery served no purpose other than to be rolled in the advance line of water, which snatched them away with other debris. The eggs rolled forward until they shattered against each other and the yellow yolks and half-formed bodies of baby birds became mixed in the swell of froth.¹⁰⁴⁵

¹⁰⁴³ See for instance Deborah Rose 1996 and 2005.

¹⁰⁴⁴ See pp. 68, 163 and 199. The mainstream-Australian poet Judith Wright (not related to the author) had already used the image of the imported, "homesick" tree and made a case for the defence of Indigenous flora and fauna in her poetry and prose (Wright 1963: 17). In the short essay "Trees and Australians" she writes, "Another great-great-grandfather of mine once rode north-west from New England ... through dense bush and with lagoons everywhere, and birds in thousands. No lagoons are there now, and few trees. The birds went with them. Between them all, my forebears must have accounted for many thousands of trees over many thousands of acres. With settlement, no doubt most of those trees had to go, but some certainly could have been saved. They would now be preventing wind and water erosion, forming wind-breaks and shade for stock, adding to soil nutrients, protecting water-catchments and supporting wildlife. But nobody thought of soil erosion then, and few suspected the role trees played in the natural cycle. And, after all, they were only *Australian* trees, thought of as ugly, monotonous, hostile. The settlers did plant a few trees, and they linger on to remind us; they are now ageing and some are dying. Pines, elms, poplars, willows and some fruit-trees—something to remind them of their English background. Australian trees seldom survived near settlers' houses; they were not worth looking at" (Wright 1975: 236).

¹⁰⁴⁵ 98.

Significantly, *Plains of Promise* opens with a similar doom-ridden image, which stages the disastrous effects of the imposition of White civilisation as nature and society are uncannily out of place and sink: “The biggest tree on St Dominic’s Mission for Aborigines ... next to the girls’ dormitory” is a foreign species brought by the first White missionaries into the Gulf Country.¹⁰⁴⁶ Originally from Madagascar, the Poinciana tree is considered invasive because its dense foliage and root system pushes out other, Indigenous flora. The novel develops this first arboreal image as follows:

So God’s celebratory Poinciana tree came into being, surviving the claypans, the droughts and the Wets to grow large and graceful in the presence of three generations of black girls laughing in their innocence as if nothing mattered at all. Its roots clung tighter to the earth when the girls cried out for their mothers or wept into its branches when they were lonely or hurt, enduring the frustration and cruelty of their times. The tree grew in spite of all of this. Healthy and unexploited, unaffected when illness fell on all sides, witnessing the frequent occurrence of premature deaths, none of which affected the growth of God’s tree ... 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.¹⁰⁴⁷

The vampiric quality of the tree, which severs the life-sustaining connection between humans, the land and the spirit world, is underscored by its lonely inhabitant, a black crow which acts as the uncanny harbinger of death. The bird’s presence ties in with a setting that maps race across gender in stunting ways for the young Aboriginal girls in the mission barracks, and bides little hope for the future of the mission mob.

As an outcast amongst the already marginalised, Ivy Koopundi epitomises the uncanny disruption amongst this community of Natives, 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

¹⁰⁴⁶ 1.

¹⁰⁴⁷ 1-2.

velvet', which to the Natives uncannily translates as her possession by the dark powers she has allegedly inherited from her nameless Aboriginal mother. The latter, a "crazy woman from another country [with] 'that look' in her eye,"¹⁰⁴⁸ ends up in frenzy after Ivy has been separated from her at the mission compound for being half-caste. Her mother's self-immolation, caused by the maddening despair after the loss of her child, is scripted in the racial and gendered oppression of the Aboriginal underclass in White Australia:

Ivy was all the woman had left. The child she gave birth to when she was little more than a child herself. The child of a child and the man who said he loved her during the long, hot nights on the sheep station where she had grown up. She had not seen the likes of a mission before. That was a place where bad Aborigines were sent—as she was frequently warned by the station owners who separated her from her family, to be an older playmate-cum-general help for their own children. So she was always careful she made sure to be good. Even to the man who seduced her by night she was good. She believed in love and he loved her just like her bosses did. With kindness. 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.¹⁰⁴⁹

Ivy's mother's suicide, however, is staged in the uncanny terrain of the Dreaming: nightmarish visitations of a violently attacking crow convince her "she was being punished and would die soon ... 'I sick ... I sick ... I sick'."¹⁰⁵⁰ Her death presumably triggers off a long series of inexplicable self-immolations amongst the highly fragmented and weakened Aboriginal mob living in the insalubrious, profoundly alienating

¹⁰⁴⁸ 7.

¹⁰⁴⁹ 12.

¹⁰⁵⁰ 15.

conditions of the mission compound. The latter is regulated by discriminating, racist mainstream policies and Christian mores:

The woman who had killed herself ... was not eligible for a mission hut—corrugated iron, one-room huts that looked like slight enlargements of outdoor dunnies. They were lined up in rows, with a single tap at the end of every second row. One tap for every two hundred people. They housed what mission authorities referred to as ‘nuclear families’. That is, husband and wife with children, no matter how many. If the children had been forcibly removed to the segregated dormitories the couples made room for grandparents, or other extra relatives these people insisted should live with them.¹⁰⁵¹

In the face of the downward spiral of Native self-destruction, the community identifies Ivy with evil and death, as her nickname “the crow’s timekeeper”¹⁰⁵² and the heading of the first book section, “The Timekeeper’s Shadow,” record. This makes her the easy target of marginalisation, ostracism, and physical and sexual abuse, so that Michelle Grossman observes that the novel is:

... preoccupied to some extent with the politics of blame: how ‘blame’ comes to be assigned, its meanings and impacts in different historical and cultural settings, and its limitations in either explaining the past or mapping out possibilities for the future ... *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.¹⁰⁵³

The uncanny blame bestowed upon Ivy for the upheaval and destruction that affects and riddles the mission community triggers off the same racial and gendered vicious circle which defeated her mother. A solitary, vulnerable yet attractive adolescent, she falls prey to the depredations of the sexually deprived Missionary and local Protector

¹⁰⁵¹ 11.

¹⁰⁵² 22.

¹⁰⁵³ Grossman 1998: 84-5.

Errol Jipp. However, in a perverse reversal of agency, she is accused of this ‘seduction’ which results in pregnancy. Uncannily, the Natives configure Ivy as a warped, racialised version of the Biblical Eve, the origin of vice and evil, thus merging misogynist Christian spirituality with the Dreaming. As she has picked the forbidden apple of carnal knowledge with the Other, they accuse her of plunging the community into destruction. Allegedly, Ivy’s racial ‘dilution’, identitarian dispossession and questioned sexuality fold into an overpowering “evil” force¹⁰⁵⁴—a curse whose destructive powers cannot be curbed by the community. In an act that aims to erase the uncanny borders of racial and gendered identity, ‘Poison Ivy’ is eventually violently expelled from this warped Garden of Eden. She spends more than two decades away in a distant mental asylum belonging to the mission order, where she disappears into a “massive sulk ... trying to find a missing person: herself.”¹⁰⁵⁵ The attempt to reinstate binaries at the Mission space is further underscored in the fostering out of Mary, the forbidden hybrid fruit¹⁰⁵⁶ of Ivy’s sexual intercourse with the Missionary.

6.2.2. Elliot: Law-abiding or defying?

The uncanny operates in manifold ways at St Dominic’s, which has become notorious amongst Gulf Natives as “a place of evil” whence “suicides spread throughout the Aboriginal world.”¹⁰⁵⁷ The mission authorities, however, never understand that the disruption is caused by the Natives’ displacement from their traditional homelands and regrouping into an artificial mob of unaffiliated strangers. Consequently, the imposition of Christian ritual is ineffective and unable to gloss over the underlying issue of dispossession, whose uncanny effects manifest themselves through Native sickness and mortality, and interrogate the Christian framework of spiritual healing. Furthermore, unknown and hidden to the mission authorities, a council of Aboriginal elders has been constituted out of tribal fragments at the Mission to detain Ivy’s ‘evil’ powers. An alternative centre of power, its existence is illegal under the provisions of the Aboriginal Protection Act, which inscribes Natives as wards of state. Thus, in line with the Freudian uncanny, secrecy about its actions is required at all times to avoid harmful penalisations on the Indigenous community:

¹⁰⁵⁴ 22-3.

¹⁰⁵⁵ 167.

¹⁰⁵⁶ To follow the terms of racial assimilation addressed in *Benang*, with Mary racial absorption increases from ‘half-caste’ to ‘quadroon’, and so does identitarian ‘loss’.

¹⁰⁵⁷ 37.

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. Who could initiate the proper procedures to investigate the matter these days? Several generations had slipped by since anyone had to do this kind of thing ... "Everyone leads mission life now ... Are we really different people now or not?" ... Had there been too much interference with the old ways? ... For a long while, everyone had watched out for the power of Jesus Christ to come and deal with this matter of evil. Nothing had happened ... Given the fact that the original source of evil—so everyone was convinced—stemmed from Ivy Koopundi's mother, people were prepared to reinstate their tribal governing laws over Christian institutional life ... It was a matter of survival.¹⁰⁵⁸

The almost insurmountable complexities of the Council's task 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," without involving the mission authorities.¹⁰⁵⁹ This confusion necessarily unsettles the task of Elliot Pugnose, the law-abiding emissary who is to travel in secret to Ivy's homeland after long years of local mishaps.

As nature dies off along his songline into Ivy's home country, he becomes convinced that the Elders, misled by Christian spirituality, have sent him out as the 'sacrificial lamb' to redeem his people from Ivy's evil powers. Not surprisingly within the Christian framework that co-inspires the novel, Elliot's name is a diminutive derived from Elias, a Latin spelling of the Biblical 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 death. Many of these features are mirrored in Elliot, which uncannily plays on the notion that Elliot is some kind of saviour

¹⁰⁵⁸ 6-7.

¹⁰⁵⁹ 41.

in possession of a greater truth.¹⁰⁶⁰ In the Bible Elijah, who allegedly lived in the 9th century BC, predicts a fatal, destructive drought to king Ahab of Israel for antagonising and not worshipping the Christian God.¹⁰⁶¹ This is a lack of allegiance which is uncannily reversed by the Mission Elders in *Plains of Promise*. The dismal sight of the dried-up Great Lake confirms Elliot's worst suspicions and he foresees his own and community's end in the gruesome spectacle:

Dead pelicans were dotted here and there on top of the clay. Kilometres towards the water's centre the numbers of dead birds increased, until he was stepping over piles of stinking, fly-blown bodies ... 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.¹⁰⁶²

Yet, Elliot's long, epic journey into death (country) turns into a physical and spiritual rebirth through the return of water in the lake, which reveals the true significance of the location to him. This turns him against the Council's authority: "For Elliot, reclaiming his body was a gamble. A toss that won over fear ... 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."¹⁰⁶³ Uncanny secret/sacred knowledge is released in

¹⁰⁶⁰ Elijah is described as follows in the *Bible Guide*: "A Tishbite, from the region of Gilead; the foremost prophet in Israel during the reigns of Ahab, Ahaziah and Jehoram. The Bible depicts him as a lonely figure with no settled home, roaming the countryside, appearing and vanishing unexpectedly (I Kgs 18:12). All his life Elijah was active in the defense of his God. His teachings brought him into constant conflict with the kings of Israel, and on at least one occasion, he had to flee for his life ... The stories about Elijah are full of wonders and miraculous acts (I Kgs 17:1-6, 8-24); when his own life came to an end he was gathered up to heaven in a whirlwind (II Kgs 2:11). Specific magic powers were ascribed to Elijah's mantle (II Kgs 2:8-14) similar to those of Moses' rod. His powerful personality, which made an unforgettable impact on his own and later generations, and his demise, no ordinary mortal death but an ascent to heaven in a fiery chariot, combined to accord Elijah a special role in Jewish traditions about the End of Days (Mal 4:5-6). In the Dead Sea Scrolls he appears as one of the forerunners of the messiah. Elijah remains one of the most intriguing of the prophets of Israel, thus meriting the role in Jewish tradition as the herald of the messiah who would miraculously settle all controversies and make for more peace in the world. In the NT many identified John the Baptist with Elijah the forerunner of the messiah (Luke 1:17; John 1:21). Some thought Jesus to be Elijah (Matt 16:14; Mark 6:15; 8:28; Luke 9:8, 19) but Jesus rejected this, attributing the role to John the Baptist (Matt 11:14; 17:11ff; Mark 9:12ff). Elijah, with Moses, flanked Jesus at the Transfiguration (Matt 17:3; Mark 9:4; Luke 9:30)" (see Works Cited: "Elijah").

¹⁰⁶¹ King James version: Old Testament, 1 Kings 17:1 (See Works Cited: Bible: King James version).

¹⁰⁶² 77-9.

¹⁰⁶³ 82.

Elliot's "recovery from [his] clash with death,"¹⁰⁶⁴ 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, which celebrates the return of "[b]irds by the million ... The lake was reclaimed. The ceremony completed."¹⁰⁶⁵ 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.¹⁰⁶⁶

On his return to St Dominic's in 1958, the Elders aim to control Elliot, who, "having overcome the obstacles placed by the spirits during his journeys in alliance with unknown forces there," they see as "a bighead."¹⁰⁶⁷ By the "incongruous" union of Elliot and Ivy:

[their] plan was almost completed. 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. There would be widespread respect for their strategy. Not even a powerful white man such as Jipp could prevent Old Dorrie's powerful magic. The marriage was right and could not be prevented, and would proclaim the power of magic.¹⁰⁶⁸

Elliot's sexual and physical abuse of his spouse, "the booby prize" for his efforts, maps racial disruption across domestic violence. The Gothic rape on Ivy's wedding night¹⁰⁶⁹ is uncannily echoed in the gruesome murder of the Chinaman, whose origins and perpetrators remain troublingly unknown. No doubt due to his freedom to travel,¹⁰⁷⁰ empathy with the Australian land and understanding of the Aboriginal "culture of

¹⁰⁶⁴ 83.

¹⁰⁶⁵ 86.

¹⁰⁶⁶ 92-3.

¹⁰⁶⁷ 125.

¹⁰⁶⁸ 125-6.

¹⁰⁶⁹ "Ivy heard words of accusation sent through the mimicry of night birds. Small children's voices that spoke of bad deaths ... of babies without heartbeat inside dead women with white eyes. They whispered of ways to inflict the pain of birth and mimicked the screams of women in labour. Rambled on about ugly souls looking around the saltbush for their little human bodies. Squealed and sniggered about slothful pregnant sluts ... Elliot pushed Ivy into a clearing he knew well, behind some prickly pear bushes ... The Christian marriage was consummated on the ground in silence—save for the mimic sounds that only Ivy could hear. 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" (128-9).

¹⁰⁷⁰ The Chinese did not need a travel permit under the existing legislation, unlike people classified as Aboriginal.

traditional ownership,”¹⁰⁷¹ the Chinaman is chosen by the Council to return Ivy to her homeland, but this plan is stunted 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 amongst 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.¹⁰⁷²

Disturbingly and puzzlingly, the location of the killing is the exact place where Elliot first raped Ivy, which triggers off a series of unanswered speculations. If Elliot *is* responsible, 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. On the other hand, perhaps Elliot was exercising his patriarchal rights as Ivy’s husband, due to not having been informed of the Council’s stratagem. Against these plausible explanations, 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 one should interpret the fact that the killing presumably required the force of more than one aggressor. The latter might suggest that the Elders were unable to overcome divergent group interests and fragmentation, and disagreed on Ivy’s marriage and removal. The Chinaman mediates between different cultures and his name, Pilot Ah King, is indicative of his multicultural, floating status. The notion of cultural trespassing he embodies might not have sat well with purists amongst the fragmentary mission mob and fed into his violent assassination.

Pilot’s ghost reveals the uncanny complexity but not the workings of the Aboriginal universe: “*Draw no simple conclusions my friend. All are implicated.*”¹⁰⁷³ Yet again, the unsettling sensation dawns that Western schemes of interpretation come to

¹⁰⁷¹ 138.

¹⁰⁷² 132.

¹⁰⁷³ 140 (Wright’s emphasis).

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 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 behaviour simply symptomatic for a profound disruption of 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 defamiliarises non-Indigenous readers from this crucial event in the novel and leaves them with a desolating image of 'gratuitous' violence. Here, the uncanny effect obtains "in a structure which can never be subjected to any definitive kind of verification."¹⁰⁷⁴ Traditional plot lines expect a resolution in terms of clear cause and effect, but no such pattern develops in this Aboriginal murder mystery. The lay preacher Jimbo Delainy, significantly Old Dorrie's renegade son, foregrounds the latter issue in suggesting White law solve the matter of the Chinaman's murder. However, the Council counters with: "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."¹⁰⁷⁵ This lack of mutual acknowledgement would reword the problem as follows: how can an empowering notion of Aboriginal identity and belonging re-instate itself within Native communities in the face of Native/non-Native incommensurability? The novel's plot focus on the ostracised Koopundi family line suggests that the key is to be found in the shifty role played by the Aboriginal Trinity Ivy, Mary and Jessie.

6.2.3. The female Aboriginal Trinity: problem or solution?

The politics of child removal see a lasting separation of Ivy and Mary Koopundi, who, having lived a suburban existence in a White environment on the distant Southern seaboard, ends up thoroughly Westernised. The focus on Ivy's stolen child shifts the problematic search for Aboriginal identity and empowerment to the contemporary urban setting in an uncanny quest for hidden, potentially harmful knowledge. A solitary outsider and aware of her racial difference, Mary is in search of her Aboriginal origins,

¹⁰⁷⁴ Gelder & Jacobs 1998: 26.

¹⁰⁷⁵ 143-4.

whose “traces ... had been removed from official documentation”¹⁰⁷⁶ but were revealed to her by her deceased White foster parents.

In a subtle intertextual reference to the publication date of *My Place* and its controversial inscription of Aboriginal identity, it is only at the time of the Bicentennial that Mary finds such an opportunity through her emotional and professional involvement in a pan-Aboriginal political movement. The novel refuses a comforting identification between Mary and Aboriginality, and thus, by extension, excludes the reader from the accommodation into facile forms of Reconciliation that *My Place* supposedly provides. Rather, the text takes issue with Mary’s received form of Aboriginality by de-romanticising her quest for 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.’”¹⁰⁷⁷ Even when Mary manages to establish the necessary connections to her homeland, the uncanny truth is that:

... 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.¹⁰⁷⁸

Mary’s unproductive search for Aboriginality is embedded in a relationship with the manipulative, opaque Buddy Doolan, the Coalition of Aboriginal Governments’ Native leader. This affair is symptomatic for Mary’s deep sense of un-belonging and underscores gendered disempowerment in the urban setting of contemporary Aboriginal politics:

Mary knew she had no hold over him. He would not contact her. He hadn’t even asked about [their baby] Jessie. His ego, his people and land came before anything, or anyone else. While they needed him, he needed nothing else ... She urgently needed to finalise their relationship. He seemed to feel he could walk in and out as he pleased. It did not really matter to him. So long

¹⁰⁷⁶ 209.

¹⁰⁷⁷ 227.

¹⁰⁷⁸ 297.

as he had somewhere to put his dick. Momentary love. Wherever, whoever, without ties.¹⁰⁷⁹

Despite this permanent non-encounter but indicative for the problems riddling Aboriginal recovery, Mary and Buddy's hapless coupling bears potentially dangerous fruit. Jessie is "a very special child ... [who] ... will be a powerful woman one day,"¹⁰⁸⁰ but causes Grandfather Frank Doolan, a traditional healer, to have a premonitory nightmare harking back to Ivy's mother's suicide:

Frank dreamed he was travelling inside a spinifex fire, being carried along with it. As it travels forward his line of vision is just above the height of the spinifex plain: he is able to see the flame engulf the vegetation that lies ahead. Farther ahead still, he sees the fire raging on all sides of his community. Then he awakes in his own house, screaming as he swirls about in the flames engulfing all the dwellings with fiery arms while people sleep inside. He sees his own house explode and is part of the flames that have grabbed his home, where his family are sleeping. He is screaming for them to wake up. To get out. But no matter how hard he screams, his voice is unheard ... Frank was pretty shaken by his dream and the crow [in the flat] ... Buddy talked about changing the world. Frank talked about *death* and *powerlessness*.¹⁰⁸¹

Mary is advised to return Jessie to her homeland although, typically, the text leaves the reader wondering why "[p]eople like Jessie had to forfeit next-of-kin while passing through this world."¹⁰⁸²

Time and again, the novel insists on the inaccessibility of the Aboriginal universe. Mary's attempts to trace her origins are constantly thwarted by the vicious circle of her own uprootedness and others' silence,¹⁰⁸³ so she never manages to establish lasting connections with Aborigines. She lacks kinship connections and boasts Westernised attitudes and convictions:

¹⁰⁷⁹ 228.

¹⁰⁸⁰ 214-5.

¹⁰⁸¹ 220-1 (my emphasis).

¹⁰⁸² 270.

¹⁰⁸³ Notably, 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).

Mary probably didn't know much about the sleazy side of life ... She had never thought of moving away from the city. Everything she needed was there ... With no family of her own, Mary's life was as solitary as it had been in the city. For reasons unknown to her, the few Aboriginal men she met along the way were unprepared to form a relationship that would last longer than a one-night stand of passionless penetration ... 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.¹⁰⁸⁴

However, is it because of this that people keep their distance or because she is perceived as imbued with evil powers?—"Bloody scary woman, [Johnno] thought, wondering why Buddy had got so hung up on her. He almost began to think of her as though she was a bogeywoman of the Gulf roads ..."¹⁰⁸⁵ Uncannily, 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, without being aware she is being reconnected to country. Moreover, local resistance against 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."¹⁰⁸⁶ Moreover, while she realizes "she did need to ... connect the threads and overcome her intuitive fear of the unknown,"¹⁰⁸⁷ she does not relate at all to St Dominic's mob:

Mary's three months at St Dominic's drew to an end. Like a wasted spore, inconsequential, she floated about, unconnected. There was nothing she could discover that connected her with the community ... 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.* Too many of them were mixed up by years of displacement themselves. The authorities

¹⁰⁸⁴ 237-40.

¹⁰⁸⁵ 249.

¹⁰⁸⁶ 243.

¹⁰⁸⁷ 254.

had brought too many people to the Mission in wire cages decades ago, and forced them to become assimilated into the local language group. Not that it really worked. People just became more engrossed in themselves and closed all doors behind them. Mary was unable to create within herself a sense of belonging, or to feel that she was related to any of the families.¹⁰⁸⁸

The final, short-lived 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 “[w]hite skin, like she got no blood,”¹⁰⁸⁹ has been returned to the Mission after a long absence, 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. Uncannily, “Mary did not feel comfortable here; there was an eerie feeling to this place. To her it seemed as though something drastic might have happened and the people had simply got up and walked away, leaving everything behind.”¹⁰⁹⁰ In a disturbing image that relives Frank’s nightmare of death, destruction and loss:

[b]alls of dry spinifex rolled along the ground and hurtled through the air, passing through the coals to be ignited by loose sparks, then floating over their bodies like fireballs ...At first Mary thought it was an animal. A wild animal cowering in one corner. A ‘roo or emu, with long, matted fur or feathers. She screamed for Victor. By now heavy rain had started to pelt down, with pebbles of hail ... The old woman growled like an animal. Mary had never heard anything like it. She felt cold shivers running through her body. Jessie started screaming again.¹⁰⁹¹

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,”¹⁰⁹² 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 both the parameters of Western reality and the Dreaming.

¹⁰⁸⁸ 282-3.

¹⁰⁸⁹ 200-1 (my emphasis).

¹⁰⁹⁰ 288-9 (my emphasis).

¹⁰⁹¹ 293.

¹⁰⁹² 294.

Buddy's inadequate substitute Johnno has misused information gathered at St Dominic's Mission in his need for voter support. So as to convince city-based Aborigines of a treaty with the federal government, he has publicly defended that places like St Dominic's 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." The Council of Elders takes offence at this but also accuses Elliot of causing havoc by uniting the three women. In an uncanny merger of Dreaming and Christian knowledge, they constitute Mary, Jessie and Ivy as an evil mirror image of the Holy Trinity—the Father, the 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.*¹⁰⁹³

Typically for the troubling character of the novel, it could be argued that the weakening and corruption of the Coalition's politics is precisely the disruptive effect of Mary's 'evil' presence—just as Ivy's presence destroyed the mental institution and religious authority at St Dominic's¹⁰⁹⁴ and a camp of Aboriginal 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."¹⁰⁹⁵

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,"¹⁰⁹⁶ defies Western conceptions of fiction inasmuch "Aboriginal societies ... do not recognise a category 'fiction'."¹⁰⁹⁷ 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."¹⁰⁹⁸ The uncanny complexity of the novel,

¹⁰⁹³ 299.

¹⁰⁹⁴ 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).

¹⁰⁹⁵ 301.

¹⁰⁹⁶ 302.

¹⁰⁹⁷ Muecke 1992: 65.

¹⁰⁹⁸ Muecke 1992: 89.

which confronts mainstream and Native 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 uncanny. In her gendered discussion of the uncanny, Hélène Cixous wrote that its literary representation, the ghost, is a most tangible non-sign; ghosts do not exist outside fiction, but as fiction is just "another form of reality,"¹⁰⁹⁹ they touch upon the real. Ghosts are the uncanny un-dead and therefore mediate between life and death, between representation and non-representation. Thus, "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."¹¹⁰⁰ From this perspective, the role of Ivy—whom the text scripts as a w/White ghost—may represent both destruction and regeneration, and identitarian experimentation in Elliot's story.

Not surprisingly, therefore, his tale has no clear-cut interpretations. 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 but obscure symbol of evil in the novel, stand for White civilisation, and that the solitary water-bird represents Ivy's mother. The latter is endowed with the gift of life by its *secret* ability to keep the water flowing in the 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 civilisation. They emulate White disruption of the Aboriginal tribal tissue, removal of the Natives 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 Aboriginal 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

¹⁰⁹⁹ Cixous 1976: 546.

¹¹⁰⁰ Cixous 1976: 543. See also chapter 2, p. 48.

the drying-up of the lake.¹¹⁰¹ As a result, the massive disruption of tribal links provokes the deathblow to local Aboriginal culture, epitomised in the disappearance of the lake on Ivy's homeland, and places the blame on White society.

So if one takes matters within 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"?¹¹⁰² Could one not claim that re-establishing 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 'Travelling', that surpasses the powers of interpretation of the fragmented group of Elders? Is he not 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 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 in terms of Aboriginality? Or is this sudden resurgence of the lake the result of Elliot's initiative, and confirmed in Mary's determination to go there some day with Jessie? Is the Council of Elders indeed too affected by assimilation into White civilisation to find the right course of action?

There is yet another possible explanation for the Elders' decisions. One might argue that Mary's realisation 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. However, if the reestablishment of the family links is not allowed, this also entails a death warrant for Aboriginal culture. If the secret of regeneration is forever lost, if Aboriginal culture has no future, if too much damage has been inflicted by the irruption of White civilisation into Native society, how does this match 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 Aboriginal culture to come to terms with itself? Does it offer an opportunity to the Stolen Generations to recover their Indigenous roots?

¹¹⁰¹ 304.

¹¹⁰² O'Brien 2007: 218.

All in all, what the mainstream reader of the novel perceives as (the female Gothic's) open-endedness is completely unnerving. No clear answers are given to repair the Aboriginal plight, and to a greater or lesser degree, blame is assigned to all sides involved in the problems. Here, the uncanny obviously operates through unfamiliarity with the Aboriginal universe, which, while actively engaging with the events portrayed, 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 causes doubts as to who is following the right path 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, neither are they within the literal: they leave us with the issue of hybridity. What is to be done with Ivy, Mary and Jessie, who are neither Aboriginal nor Western women? Is their existence productive in terms of Aboriginality? 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?

6.2.4. The Stolen Generations: lost or found?

A serious problem in coming to terms with *Plains of Promise* for non-Aboriginal readers is their lack of familiarity with the spiritual universe of Indigenous society, the Dreaming or Dreamtime. However, they will readily recognise the injustices bestowed upon the Native community due to the process of White colonisation. The latter is emblematically represented in the blind imposition of Christian mission values and regulations on a haphazardly gathered group of dispossessed Natives from different tribal affiliations at St Dominic's. It is also evident in the profiteering of the White health industry that flourishes on the presence of Ivy's Aboriginal 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.¹¹⁰³

Carolyn Bliss, a US-based critic, aptly describes the colonising process 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 ... all too real” for the mainstream reader. The latter, however, is not the case in the perception of the Aboriginal characters, whose:

... 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.

While she understands this lack of accessibility as problematic, she argues that the novel’s “honesty” works precisely due to its “insistent unapologetic otherness.”¹¹⁰⁴

Bliss’s account of Wright’s “impressive debut” draws attention to the uncanny qualities of this “disturbing story”¹¹⁰⁵ as it confronts non-Aboriginal readers with what should be conceived of as a parallel, incommensurable Indigenous universe that operates within, through, against and independent from mainstream reality. It is as if one can scratch the surface of this tale of colonisation and reveal the pulse of an entirely different world beyond Western understanding, which defamiliarises and alienates the reader and makes the fictional space unhomely. To account for this palimpsest, this incommensurable encounter of the mainstream and Aboriginal universe, Carolyn Bliss draws similarities with the genres of South-American magic realism and North-American

¹¹⁰³ 265-6 (Wright’s emphasis).

¹¹⁰⁴ Bliss 1998: 682 (my emphasis).

¹¹⁰⁵ Bliss 1998: 681.

nature writing by Indigenous writers. That 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.¹¹⁰⁶

Other critics have also pointed this way, such as Jenny Pausacker who, in the national newspaper *The Age*, considers the novel as an exponent of “an authentically Australian magic realism that puts imported versions into new perspective.”¹¹⁰⁷

Elsewhere I have argued that such a label—though often used regarding Indigenous Australian fiction—may be problematic, as the joining of ‘Magic’ with the European ‘Realist’ tradition suggests the possibility of the former’s incorporation into Western scientific logic and rationality. Such assimilation is rejected by the political agenda of self-definition and self-determination that operates through Wright’s text, and therefore another qualification for Wright’s novelistic experimentation should be sought. A term such as ‘uncanny realism’ caters for the sense of harrowing estrangement Wright’s novel provides,¹¹⁰⁸ although this Freudian solution should be understood to work mainly from the point of view of the non-Native reader; yet, Aboriginal readership will probably feel more at home in Wright’s fictional world. Not surprisingly, Wright lines out her target audience from an inner circle of the ‘initiated’ to wider, outer ones of ‘uninitiated’ readers. All of the latter should be addressed with issues relevant to the Aboriginal community, as they often result 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 work. Even so ... there are other main goals of being a writer, particularly as an Aboriginal writer, such as the goal of publication, and as

¹¹⁰⁶ Bliss 1998: 682.

¹¹⁰⁷ Quoted on the back cover of *Plains of Promise*.

¹¹⁰⁸ See Renes 2002: 76-102. See also chapter 2: pp.98-9.

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.¹¹⁰⁹

This agenda may justify the use of ‘uncanny realism’ since the author’s largest potential audience lies there and could be productive as a cognitive paradigm for that segment of readership. However, the term’s scope remains mainstream-centred.

Alternatively, Mudrooroo has suggested Maban Reality as an Australian-Aboriginal equivalent for magic realism,¹¹¹⁰ but his current status of ostracisation in Aboriginal Studies and lack of ‘authenticity’ raise questions to its effective use. ‘Uncanny Postcolonial Fiction’ feels closer to the mark but is also limited to mainstream perception through a Freudian process of defamiliarisation in the postcolonial setting. Indeed, no one can deny that the central hybrid female characters of *Plains of Promise* are profoundly alienated from both Native and non-Native society, epitomised in their unsuccessful search for their identity and place in the world. As argued at the end of chapter 2, this lack of situatedness highlights the postcolonial as active process rather than state, which raises crucial questions as to Australia’s postcoloniality. The Aboriginal scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson speaks therefore of postcolonising processes rather than postcolonial states where Indigenous Australians are concerned.¹¹¹¹ She convincingly argues that “[t]he coloniser/colonised axis continues to be configured within this postcolonising society 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.”¹¹¹² Therefore, the epistemological values of the Aboriginal universe embodied in a novel such as *Plains of Promise* would be better served with the term Postcolonising Dreaming Narrative, because it acknowledges the uncanny interface of Native and non-Native epistemologies as a postcolonising, performative site of identity formation. Additionally, this term allows the incorporation of the generic specificities of Aboriginal story-telling.

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 characterisation

¹¹⁰⁹ Wright 2002: 19.

¹¹¹⁰ See chapter 2, p.97.

¹¹¹¹ Moreton-Robinson 2003: 30. For an extensive quote, see ch.2, pp.99-100.

¹¹¹² Moreton-Robinson 2003: 37.

can be explained neither in the exclusive terms of a Western epistemology of rationality, nor of an Aboriginal 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"¹¹¹³ each other without either taking the upper hand. Attempts to explain one universe in terms of the other ultimately are to no avail. This failure to come to agreement is paradigmatic for the political deadlock in which Australian Native/non-Native 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. Not surprisingly, 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 an uncanny role.

The effect of defamiliarisation for non-Aboriginal readers caused by the use of Postcolonising Dreaming Narrative in *Plains of Promise* troubles critical interpretations of the novel as the Aboriginal universe manifests itself, yet consistently refuses access and a clear understanding of the mechanisms behind Native destruction. Mainstream readers are alienated from traditional frames of interpretation in terms of Western science, progress, linearity, rationality, finality and truth as the behaviour and actions of most Aboriginal characters remain obscure. They are thrown back onto themselves as no solution to the female protagonists' plight is offered in this "tragedy without redemption."¹¹¹⁴ They are therefore unrelentingly left to contemplate and assume the havoc wreaked by White colonisation into which Aboriginal society is so unsuccessfully (un)assimilated.¹¹¹⁵ 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 Aboriginal plight by offering a non-accommodating narrative may precisely be 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."¹¹¹⁶

By tracing the dramatic history of genocide through the vicissitudes of the half-caste female family line, *Plains of Promise* turns into a desperate chronicle of the ways in which mainstream intervention has both caused the current Aboriginal plight and failed to

¹¹¹³ This Derridian term is quoted in Gelders & Jacobs, and connotes an uncanny process of mutual incitation, attraction, concern and disturbance (1998: 21-2). The source text is Derrida's "Différance" (1970), published in *Margins of Philosophy*. Harvester Wheatsheaf, Hertfordshire 1982.

¹¹¹⁴ Finnane 1997.

¹¹¹⁵ See Renes 2002: 76-102.

¹¹¹⁶ Ravenscroft 1998: 79-80.

provide viable solutions for it. Thus, the novel interrogates how a space for Aboriginal survival may be wrought in contemporary Australia. At the same time, Wright is critical of the ways in which Aboriginal society itself manages the issues of blame, responsibility and empowerment across the axes of race, gender and class. The novel displays this in the violence perpetrated amongst the mission dwellers and the troubling sides of Aboriginal political action in the rural and urban setting, exemplified in the disturbing male characters Elliot Pugnose and Buddy Doolan. Susan Barrett finds that “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,”¹¹¹⁷ and thus, Michelle Grossman writes:

Plains of Promise is unflagging in its insistence that readers attend not to colonialist impositions or Aboriginal resistances as discrete or exclusive categories, but look instead at the ways in which these have worked in relation to each other at various points of pivot and interregnum in the history of Australian race relations ... there is hardly a moment anywhere in the text where one version or another of ‘received Aboriginality’ is not scrutinised and challenged as a result. The central premise of *Plains of Promise* is that the methods and mechanisms of Aboriginal suffering and struggle, like the means of suicide chosen by Ivy Koopundi’s mother, are never ‘simply secondary matter’, and the novel works to restore the primacy of the distinctive ways in which Aboriginal identities and lives, particularly those of women, play out in a number of related domains. Indeed, *Plains of Promise* is consistently remarkable for the sustained candour of its investigation of the shifting gender politics by which Aboriginal women’s experiences have been governed and contextualised, and for its confrontation of the sexual politics that have informed various historical and cultural periods in the lives of Aboriginal women ... *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.¹¹¹⁸

¹¹¹⁷ Barrett 2005: 10.

¹¹¹⁸ Grossman 1998: 85-7.

Thus, Ivy, Mary and Jessie's hybridity comments on how the problems of female empowerment in both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal society have been played out through the plight of the Stolen Generations. The blame for the sexual abuse of Aboriginal women has often reverted on the resulting mixed progeny itself, and cast those children in a destructive spiral of violence, ostracism, guilt, silence and denial. As the embodiment of a cursed, 'impure' version of Aboriginality they have often been considered detrimental to Indigenous survival. Nevertheless, yet another manifestation of Indigeneity, they also configure a key to Native recovery, however illegitimately 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 Native female as a powerful, uncanny site of life and death in which the chances of survival may be both lost and found. As so many Aboriginal women writers, in *Plains of Promise* Wright has to struggle with the historical situatedness of:

Indigenous women [, who] 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 ... Australian Indigenous women's earlier autobiographical writing has been dominated by self-constructions as moral and respectable ...¹¹¹⁹

Wright, therefore, chooses a more dialogic, productive approach: while aiming to write up female Aboriginality, *Plains of Promise* consistently refuses to accommodate both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal 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 Manichaeic views of Australia's complex

¹¹¹⁹ Ferrier 2008: 41.

postcolonising condition. Rather than a return to static notions of authenticity, it defines racial and gendered conflict as an active, promiscuous negotiation of identity.

Not surprisingly, many reviewers had mixed feelings on first reading *Plains of Promise*. Paul Sharrad notes that “[m]ost of the initial response to this work was negative, largely because of the depressingly naturalistic picture of Aboriginal 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 with its multitude of “competing” characters and storylines. Sharrad acknowledges some of the formal criticism and concurs that “[o]n the first reading, there seems to be little promise at all in the plains of this book.” However, he observes that a more in-depth confrontation with the text reveals an irony which is productive in addressing multiple points of view and expresses an ambiguous, uncanny 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.¹¹²⁰

In hindsight, Sharrad therefore equally concludes that the parameters of racial and gendered conflict in Australian society are productively challenged in *Plains of Promise*:

So many of the characters in this novel have lost self-respect and are pushed about as passive objects that the book seems to hint that it is paradoxically in their destitution that their freedom lies: the power to refuse containment within white systems or patriarchal power, even via forms of madness. This is never romanticised in Wright’s work ... 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 freedom¹¹²¹

¹¹²⁰ Sharrad 2008: 4-5. For Tegan Bennett’s and Liam Davison’s reviews, see Works Cited.

¹¹²¹ Sharrad 2008: 6-7.

If Wright's fiction is a liberating attempt at a greater truth than conventional Western reality itself, how is this uncanny agenda continued, adapted and (re)shaped in *Carpentaria*, Alexis Wright's next and last novel to date?

6.3. Making What Seems Impossible Possible by Believing the Unbelievable: Uncanny Configurations of Aboriginal Truth in *Carpentaria*

A considerable amount of time elapsed between the publication of Wright's first and second novel, *Plains of Promise* and *Carpentaria*. The former received mixed reviews whereas the latter met with general critical acclaim and landed the 2007 Miles Franklin Award. This recognition seems to point towards a greater maturity in Wright's writing and a greater mainstream sensibility to the issues addressed in her fiction. Paul Sharrad, however, also highlights the thematic and structural continuity between both novels, and deems Nicholas José's 1997 review of *Plains of Promise* equally applicable to *Carpentaria*:

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 takes issue with *Carpentaria*'s tension between the real and the fantastic as follows: the uncanny "feeling that you are an outsider, an interloper, never leaves you—one minute you're being confided in ... the next you are left stranded and completely lost." Yet, this sense of defamiliarisation is productive in that *Carpentaria*:

... is that rare kind of novel which opens up an entire world to the reader, a place that 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.¹¹²²

The discomfort and lack of transparency experienced by readers of her fiction, which precisely led to *Plains of Promises*'s mixed reception,¹¹²³ represents no problem for Sharrad, who locates the “genius” of Wright’s writing precisely in her ability “[t]o marry the mythic with the mundane.” Indeed, he celebrates her uncanny 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.¹¹²⁴ Similarly, the author herself claims that “[o]ur books are time bombs and are already breaking down many barriers on their way across the world ... We only have to wait and one day we will see change. This is the hope of writing. Believing the unbelievable.”¹¹²⁵

No doubt because of the way *Carpentaria* gives shape to this agenda did it land Australia’s most prestigious literary award. Thus, Francis Devlin-Glass writes:

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. Moreover, it is designed to carry not only down generations but across a race divide which has proven difficult to bridge using traditional narrative, largely because of the incommensurabilities between western forms of storying and Indigenous ones ... 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.¹¹²⁶

¹¹²² McFadyen 2006: 43.

¹¹²³ Interestingly, 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 goes on in the urban ‘Victory Lane’ section and its aftermath ‘Plains of Papery Grass.’” (2008: 4). This could point towards a re-appraisal of Wright’s first novel.

¹¹²⁴ Sharrad 2008: 6. For Nicholas José’s review, see Works Cited.

¹¹²⁵ Wright 2002: 19-20.

¹¹²⁶ Devlin-Glass 19-20.

The notion that *Carpentaria* is, arguably, “[t]he best Australian novel for years,”¹¹²⁷ is reflected in Alison Ravenscroft’s praising review:

It is a story of old conflicts over land and belonging. But it is always a story of hope, enduring and enigmatic. 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.¹¹²⁸

Not surprisingly, the writing process of this complex novel took Alexis Wright a full decade. It generated an epic tale as large and “sprawling”¹¹²⁹ 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. Thus, Craig San Roque, an Australian psychotherapist who has worked closely with the author, observes that:

It ... takes considerable intellectual effort on the part of an indigenous writer to render that which is known and familiar (in Oceania) into a form that can be apprehended and appreciated by persons (such as myself) whose conceptions of love, death, hate, knowledge, truth and continuity are enfolded into a European grid system. My point is that Alexis has said that she had to work really hard to get this novel to do what she intuited that she had to do with it—in order to make it a work of contemporary insight *and* ancestral integrity ... It is a long book, 519 pages double spaced. You need that length and space for the fact of the matter to sink in. You need the time. The measure of time which she uses is the long singing of the country which has been practised for a long, long time.¹¹³⁰

The author’s inspiration for this contemporary origin story of biblical length and mythical impact is drawn from a commanding vision of the Gulf’s Gregory River, which she describes as the perpetual, “mighty flow of an ancestral river.” Its force reminded Wright “of the Rainbow Serpent that travels throughout the country and across our

¹¹²⁷ Ferrier 2006.

¹¹²⁸ Ravenscroft 2006.

¹¹²⁹ See the criticism by Davison 2006, Devlin-Glass 2007, Pierce 2006, Sharrad 2008 and San Roque 2008.

¹¹³⁰ San Roque 2007: 4, 19. Likewise, Carole Ferrier concludes that “[t]his is a very big novel both in its size and in its qualities ...” (2006).

traditional lands ... So in a very small way, I would like to think that *Carpentaria* is a narration of the kind of stories we can tell to our ancestral land.’¹¹³¹ Indeed, it is the author’s traditional homeland which is the novel’s setting as well as 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 populate the landscape of my writing usually come afterwards—after I have built a place for them.¹¹³²

Carpentaria could be considered an attempt at mental Native Title through an imagined recovery of the author’s traditional country. As the author writes herself, “*Carpentaria* is the land of the untouched: an Indigenous sovereignty of the imagination.”¹¹³³ Wright’s celebration of the Indigenous habitat of her homeland is peopled with an outstanding cast of Native characters torn between hope and despair fighting the odds imposed by mainstream society.

6.3.1. Voices of ‘Desperance’ or ‘Esperance’?

The very beginning of the novel harks back to the discomfiting start of *Plains of Promise* by addressing the uneasy overlap of race, gender and class issues in an Indigenous society riddled by destructive forces. The epigraph to the first chapter, entitled “From time immemorial” and capitalised and partly italicised by the author for highlight, reads:

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.

¹¹³¹ Wright 2007: 79-80.

¹¹³² Vernay 2004: 121.

¹¹³³ Wright 2007: 94.

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*.¹¹³⁴

This epigraph heads the Rainbow Serpent Dreaming which tells of the perpetual making and remaking of the country that nowadays hosts Desperance. This town is an outpost of Western civilisation hosting the divided society of the Aboriginal Westside and Eastside mobs and White Uptown. The destruction sung to Indigenous culture and land by White civilisation and Christian religion, whose colonising history is all too familiar (“We know your story already”), is uncannily questioned and defamiliarised by an Indigenous counter-narrative of mythical proportions. This counter-text is moulded by the tracks of the slow, sinuous and powerful Rainbow Serpent’s movements through Waanyi country:

The ancestral serpent, a creature larger than storm clouds, came down from the stars, laden with its own creative enormity. It moved graciously—if you had been watching with the eyes of a bird hovering in the sky far above the ground. Looking down at the serpent’s wet body, glistening from the ancient sunlight, long before man was a creature who could contemplate the next moment in time. It came down those billions of years ago, to crawl on its heavy belly, all around the wet clay soils in the Gulf of Carpentaria. Picture the creative serpent, scoring deep into—scouring down through—the slippery underground of the mudflats, leaving in its wake the thunder of tunnels collapsing to form deep sunken valleys. The sea water following in the serpent’s wake, swarming in a frenzy of tidal waves, soon changed colour from ocean blue to the yellow of mud. The water filled the swirling tracks to form the mighty bending rivers spread across the vast plains of the Gulf country. The serpent travelled over the marine plains, over the salt flats, through the salt dunes, past the mangrove forests and crawled inland. Then it went back to the sea. And it came out at another spot along the coastline and crawled inland and back again. When it finished creating the many rivers in its wake, it created one last river, no larger or smaller than the others, a river

¹¹³⁴ Wright 2006: 1 (further references to *Carpentaria* in section 3 by page numbers only).

which offers no apologies for its discontent with people who do not know it. This is where the giant serpent continues to live deep down under the ground in a vast network of limestone aquifers. They say its being is porous; it permeates everything. It is all around in the atmosphere and is attached to the lives of the river people like skin ... The inside knowledge about this river and coastal region is the Aboriginal Law handed down through the ages since time began.¹¹³⁵

This uncanny interface of Native and non-Native culture is structured as follows according to Nonie Sharp: “*Carpentaria* is 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.” While “[i]n an uncommon mix of focus the white town remains in shadow,”¹¹³⁶ the novel goes far beyond the Western containment the first chapter’s epigraph suggests; indeed, it undoes its capitalised weight by the sheer bulky impact of its interwoven, heteroglossic stories in double-spaced small print. The epigraph to the second chapter highlights the novel’s Indigenous agenda and explains its sprawling structure:

ONE EVENING IN THE DRIEST GRASSES IN THE WORLD, A CHILD WHO WAS NO STRANGER TO HER PEOPLE, ASKED IF ANYONE COULD FIND HOPE. THE PEOPLE OF PARABLE AND PROPHECY PONDERED WHAT WAS HOPELESS AND FINALLY DECLARED THEY NO LONGER EVEN KNEW WHAT HOPE WAS. THE CLOCKS, TICK-A-TY TOCK, LOOKED AS THOUGH THEY MIGHT RUN OUT OF TIME. LUCKILY, THE GHOSTS IN THE MEMORIES OF THE OLD FOLK WERE LISTENING, AND SAID ANYONE CAN FIND HOPE IN THE STORIES: THE BIG STORIES AND THE LITTLE ONES IN BETWEEN. SO...¹¹³⁷

Thus, the powerful Rainbow Snake’s stirrings of literary creation do eventually not suggest Armageddon for the Indigenous mob, but honour the town of Desperance’s name

¹¹³⁵ 1-3.

¹¹³⁶ Sharp 2007: 91.

¹¹³⁷ 12.

in wiping it from the face of the earth with a devastating cyclone. This tropical storm slowly builds up throughout the text in magic 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*.¹¹³⁸

Indeed, the Postcolonising Dreaming Narrative employed in “*Carpentaria*, a work of magic realism in Westerners’ language, becomes 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.”¹¹³⁹

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. Deborah Rose addresses Australian Aboriginal 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. She calls attention to how these belief systems foster non-hierarchical economies of mutual benefit between the different constituents of a local habitat:

... within Indigenous concepts a country is small enough to accommodate face-to-face groups of people, and large enough to sustain their lives. It is politically autonomous in respect of other, structurally equivalent, countries and at the same time is interdependent with other countries. Each country is itself the focus and source of Indigenous Law and life practice. Countries come into being through Dreaming creation. Dreamings demarcate a world of

¹¹³⁸ 519 (my emphasis).

¹¹³⁹ Sharp 2007: 92.

difference, and at the same time make the patterns and connections that cross-cut difference. Among these are those that cross-cut human and other species, creating consubstantial kindreds known as totemic groups. Other patterns include the ‘culture’ or way of life of different species including their habitats, foods, and patterns of behaviour ... Totemism is a manifestation of a broader metaphysics of ecological beneficial connectivity, and ... is communicated and validated to a significant degree through what Western scholars identify as ecological knowledge ... The overall effect of mapping benefits is to shift the analytic focus away from the concepts of resources and hierarchical food chains and toward multiplicities of species and benefits interacting in entangled systems of relationships. 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.¹¹⁴⁰

This analysis is useful for an understanding of the uncanny levelling effects of Postcolonising Dreaming Narrative as employed in *Carpentaria* on the racial, gendered and classist hierarchies and economies generated by capitalist exploitation of the land. Thus, Rose specifies that Aboriginal epistemologies “resituate the human”:

Indigenous philosophical ecology ... works with multiple recursive connections ... The first is that in this Indigenous system, subjectivity in the form of sentience and agency is not only a human prerogative but is located throughout other species and perhaps country itself. Subject-subject encounter is an ecological process that undermines the whole basis of hegemonic anthropocentrism, defined as the centring of the human within a dualistic system that hyperseparates humans from nature ... A second area for dialogue is that life processes, although they rely on humans, do not prioritise human needs and desires. The instrumentality that pervades much of traditional Western concepts of resources ... denies reciprocal responsibilities among

¹¹⁴⁰ Rose 2005: 295-7.

species ... A third area ... is kinship with nature. The consubstantial kindreds known as totemic groups include human and non-human kin. These groups ensure that non-humans and humans are part of the same moral domain. A fourth area is that the ecological system is not activated solely by human activity, but rather calls humans into relationship and activity ... Rather than humans deciding autonomously to act in the world, humans are called into action by the world. *The result is 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*¹¹⁴¹

Francis Devlin-Glass holds that Wright writes for a readership that is able to discern the importance of environmental issues from a position of artistic skill and authority.¹¹⁴² She also highlights how the novel, through the use of the central trope of the Rainbow Serpent, mobilises “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 occidental systems of knowledge. This instance of Postcolonising Dreaming Narrative also creates room for the appearance of the uncanny in blurring the neat borders between knowledge systems and provoking lack of translatability. Significantly, Devlin-Glass speaks of “dreaming narratives” which:

... 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.¹¹⁴³

Developing an eco-psychological tack, the Jungian psycho-analyst Craig San Roque does not wish to subsume Indigenous realities and imagination into a ‘doggy’ European framework, the origins of his discipline. He claims that “only a handful of

¹¹⁴¹ Rose 2005: 302-3 (my emphasis).

¹¹⁴² Devlin-Glass 2007: 83.

¹¹⁴³ Devlin-Glass 2008: 1-3 (my emphasis). I have borrowed her use of “dreaming narrative” to propose Postcolonising Dreaming Narrative’ as an Indigenous Australian genre.

people in our profession, in Australia ... have mindfully developed a mature acknowledgment of the psychological value and vitality of the indigenous faculty of imagination—that is to say, *imagination alive in the specific context of the local environment*—in ‘country’.” He proposes Alexis Wright’s writing as an example of such a “specifically located indigenous imagination ... Alexis connects ancestral themes, nature experienced, contemporary fact.”¹¹⁴⁴

Driving the eco-psychological argument further, Michele 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.*¹¹⁴⁵

This antidote can be understood to engage the uncanny in inscribing the Indigenous and non-Indigenous world simultaneously into the text. Thus, it pits the modern, familiar

¹¹⁴⁴ San Roque 2007: 1-3 (my emphasis).

¹¹⁴⁵ Grossman 2006 (my emphasis). Romain Rolland (1866-1944) was a French dramatist, essayist, art historian, mystic and pacifist who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1915 and became a major influence on Freud’s work. His theory of oceanic feeling was developed out of his studies of Eastern mysticism. Grossman’s use of the metaphor of “a world forever at war” is significant 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 “[s]tubborn 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 steady love affair (426, my emphasis).

world of Christian faith and civilising zeal against the ancient secret/sacred Dreamtime belief and regenerative power of the Rainbow Serpent. It is these two incommensurable epistemologies that *solicit* each other throughout the text:

This double-or-nothing proposition marks out the territory of *Carpentaria*. It's a novel in which the doppelgänger effect of indigenous and settler ways of being and knowing is fully, furiously, sustained as tandem stories and lives variously intersect and diverge, yet remain haunted by the shadows of others' truths and lies ...¹¹⁴⁶

In Grossman's understanding, however, as a locally-specific, non-hierarchical and non-exploitative form of knowledge it is the Aboriginal 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." Indeed, "*Carpentaria* is a swelling, heaving, tsunami of a novel,"¹¹⁴⁷ 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 civilisation on the local coast. This matches Craig San Roque's postcolonising perspective that "[t]he bruising truth is that Australasia and Oceania are locations of 'end times' for many, and 'new times' for others,"¹¹⁴⁸ uncannily locating new life in the crucible of death. The nucleus of destruction and renewal in the novel is a town whose culture is ominously forged by the exploitative, materialistic and destructive economy of local mining. Responsible for Indigenous dispossession and dislocation, Gurfurrit Mining Corp is reminiscent of the powerful Century Zinc mining company's impact on Waanyi country.¹¹⁴⁹ 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 postcolonise.

¹¹⁴⁶ Grossman 2006. In chapter 2 the issue of the haunting, defamiliarising effect of the 'doppelgänger' or double is addressed as a prime instance of the appearance of the uncanny (p. 43).

¹¹⁴⁷ Grossman 2006.

¹¹⁴⁸ San Roque 2008: 4.

¹¹⁴⁹ Devlin-Glass 2007: 82; Wright 1998, 2001. Interestingly, in *Carpentaria* the mining company bears the name Gurfurrit, which seems a phonetic transcription of the expression 'go for it'. Is this a subtle reference to its unscrupulous land-grabbing policy?

One important terrain in which Wright's belief in the power of language to change the world¹¹⁵⁰ is played out is irony, which is used to comment on local characters and sites from a critical Indigenous perspective. This is especially so where Uptown's White population is concerned, where naming is used to match form to content—'Mayor Bruiser', 'Constable Truthful E'Strange', 'Y. Pedigree', 'I. Damage', 'A. Clone', 'U. Torrent', 'B. Easy' are indicative of their respective personalities. In contrast, a blurring lack of identity is suggested for a whole range of anonymous inhabitants taking their last name after Elias Smith. However, the prime example of this black humour is the town's name Desperance, given in honour of its founder Captain Matthew Desperance Flinders. This toponym plays on an uncanny shuttling between doom and hope by engaging different morphological possibilities across a variety of languages. Its connotations range from "desperate", "despair" (E), "désespoir" (Fr), "desesperado" and "desesperanza" (Esp) to "d'espoir" (Fr), "de esperanza" (Esp), and thus "of hope" or "hopeful" (E). This ambiguity reflects in the town's history. The seaboard town's natural marine economy is cut short by the changing tracks of a snaking "river that spurns human effort in one dramatic gesture." It cuts its port off from the sea,¹¹⁵¹ and the economic activity shifts to the exploitative impact of mining. However, the mine explosion foreshadows the destructive tidal wave which turns Desperance onomatopoeically into a "boomtown"¹¹⁵² 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 wreaked 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 civilisation and re-inscribed 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 environmentally-sound perspective.¹¹⁵³

6.3.1.1. Norm Phantom

¹¹⁵⁰ Wright 2002: 20.

¹¹⁵¹ 3.

¹¹⁵² 98.

¹¹⁵³ 515-9. 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).

Like Kim Scott's *True Country*, *Carpentaria* functions within the parameters of heteroglossia, vaunting a multitudinous presence of local characters in longer and shorter stories. However, the priming of a life-restoring, ecological and epistemological understanding of and respect for local environment is given shape through characters belonging to Desperance's Native mob. The area's traditional owners tell the most important stories of this contemporary origin myth, and the novel's Indigenous-environmentalist agenda is foremost projected 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:

The roar of the sea showed no mercy. There would be no letting up. No respite for quietness. There was noise in the movement of water flooding back to the sea carting the wreckage with it. All passed over the flooded land groaning with the remains of buildings, boats, cars, trees, rocks, electricity poles, fences, cargo from fallen ships, plastic consignments scrambled like licorice allsorts and dead animals. All this rolled along, slamming together in the water, just like it had on the beach in his dream. 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*.¹¹⁵⁴

Normal Phantom 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 Gulf of Carpentaria, which moulds the coast:

The Pricklebush mob say that Normal Phantom could grab hold of the river in his mind and live with it as his father's fathers did before him. His ancestors were the river people who were living with the river from before time began.

¹¹⁵⁴ 487 (my emphasis).

Normal was like ebbing water, he came and went on the flowing waters of the river right out to the sea ... He knew fish, and was on friendly terms with gropers, the giant codfish of the Gulf sea ... When he talked about stars, they said he knew as much about the sky as he did about water ...¹¹⁵⁵

Indeed, 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 honour his legendary life-saving powers, believed to boost 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."¹¹⁵⁶

Nevertheless, Norm is also "an old tribal man" who is condemned to live "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."¹¹⁵⁷ Norm's existence is strongly affected by the Indigenous subjugation to Western civilisation. Significantly, his natural habitat has perverted into an uncanny fringe location associated with disposal, destruction, disease and death, which puts into question the benefits and efficiency of the Western capitalist production mode and culture. This liminal site scarcely provides for the redundant, dispossessed traditional owners of the area, who subsist by scraping together a meagre living from White society's cast-offs. Its existence at the margins of the town's invisible safety net—a clever metaphor for the "distance of tolerance" instated against Indigenous people and "other evils"—allows the maintenance of the artificial race and class boundaries of White Uptown's society.¹¹⁵⁸

However, the site's inscription in figurative death is also marked by the presence of Norm's workshop, which defies the very laws of wasteful capitalist accumulation by recycling dead matter into perpetual artistic beauty. As behoves uncanny locations, Norm's artistic activity in this studio projects beyond his marginal status in Desperance's

¹¹⁵⁵ 6.

¹¹⁵⁶ 8 and 230. Note that just 150 kms east of the Gregory river, the Norman river streams 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 1801-3, 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 1798-9, he gave his name to Flinders Island, which plays an important role in Mudrooroo's Tasmanian quintet (see Works Cited: "Matthew Flinders").

¹¹⁵⁷ 4.

¹¹⁵⁸ 100.

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’ turns into a place of un-dead, Gothic haunting for the locals:

The fishroom never kept the silence of the dead. Peculiar things happened in his workroom where he competed with the spirits of who knows what, to make fish from the sea come back to life, to look immortal ... Mortality did not belong in this room ... he began to understand the room was like a pickpocket, robbing people of their memories. Norm accused the room of becoming a hoarder of other people’s secrets of the heart ... It occurred to him that all truths were being accumulated. Poor truth sucked straight out of the minds of all the unrighteous people who came to admire his handiwork ... 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 ...¹¹⁵⁹

Through his Groper Dreaming, uncannily mirrored in the ‘science’ of taxidermy, Norm is powerfully associated with the haunting spirit world, turning him into a ghost of sorts. Norm Phantom’s rather hilarious, oxymoronic name is a further indication of his uncanny, ambiguous status in the local community. Within a local epistemology his Indigeneity should be the N/norm for the area yet this is not perceived as such by White Uptowners. Their sense of place is built on a false sense of history and belonging: “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.”¹¹⁶⁰ This lack of history turns the White settlers into the real ghosts of the place, but ironically it is Norm Phantom’s spirituality that is de-normalised and ghosted.

¹¹⁵⁹ 205-8.

¹¹⁶⁰ 57.

Norm's spirituality and presence in Desperance are also defied by Joseph Midnight's Eastside mob, who occupy the fringe on the other end of town. In a comic wink to some of the fraudulent materialistic excesses provoked by Native Title legislation, they make a false claim on the location through the invented tribal identity of "Wangabiya, so as to benefit from mining royalties."¹¹⁶¹ The Eastsiders emulate White settlers' unsustainable claims on the territory, which have spurred the Natives' division. Thus, Mozzie Fishman recalls, "I can tell you perfectly for four hundred years, the Midnight people have been doing the wrong thing ... When the mine was built it exacerbated the situation because it created a window of opportunity for Joseph and his family to start making Native title claims over the area ..."¹¹⁶² With the local White economy fuelling the feud between both patriarchs, the separation of both mobs has become deeply entrenched. Thus, Joseph Midnight is responsible for seriously undermining Norm's reputation by creating the uncanny myth of the feral pig Abilene. Abilene is allegedly responsible for attacking and killing members of Midnight's mob on Norm's instigation: "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 ..."¹¹⁶³ Norm's uncanny connection to violent death eventually feeds into his loss of status and disappearance from Desperance. Whereas Norm attempts to live as any N/normal human being, he is forced to become a P/phantom on the margins of White society. Hovering in the uncanny liminal area of life and death, Norm's ghostly presence haunts White society. This uncanny tension is most powerfully inscribed through his quest to take the corpse of his friend Elias to its last resting place, the site of Norm's Groper Dreaming, which musters up the devastating cyclone.

Norm's songline leads him on a sea journey that puts many of his beliefs to the test and profoundly changes him, reactivating his Indigenous agency. It is a mythical confrontation with the liminal terrain of life and death, not only challenging the racial but also gendered parameters of his convictions. Norm's frightening reunion with the element of water is inscribed in the conflictive relationship with his former wife Angel Day, and

¹¹⁶¹ 52.

¹¹⁶² 426.

¹¹⁶³ 113, 153-4, 318. Note Abilene was also the name of a 19th c. frontier town in the American Wild West, notorious for its crime and lawlessness (see Works Cited: "Abilene").

harks back to Cixous' gendered account of the uncanny.¹¹⁶⁴ Angel Day's predilection for the town's rubbish tip reads as an ironic metaphor for incomplete Indigenous assimilation into Whiteness, condemned to remain 'smudged'. A tribal queen of sorts,¹¹⁶⁵ she is responsible for choosing Desperance's dump as their home. This is much to Norm's disgust, who perceives it as a place of "haunting spirits" and, in impotent rage, leaves to fish at sea for five years.¹¹⁶⁶ Her retrieval of an old clock implies a conversion to White mores: "In the new sweet life, the Phantom family would be marching off to bed at the correct time, just like the school thought was really desirable, then they would march off to school on time to do their school work."¹¹⁶⁷ The town dump also becomes her personal site of worship when she paints a found statue of the Virgin Mary into an Aboriginal Madonna.¹¹⁶⁸ Angel Day even rekindles the land conflict by demanding traditional ownership of the rubbish tip, not wanting to share her "treasures" with the Indigenous community out of greedy selfishness: "Precarious modernity squashed by hostilities dormant for four hundred years, and Angel Day started it up again over an old clock and a statue."¹¹⁶⁹ In the process of Whitewashing, Angel eventually commits adultery with Mozzie Fishman in the year of the Bicentennial and leaves Norm. It is a long and slow journey out of her traditional homeland into the margins of the colonial Metropole, affected by a perverse kind of assimilation. Thus, in an uncanny write-off in the realm of the Dreaming, the text presents her as a ghostly outcast of both Indigenous and White society:

In the end Angel was lost. Lost on the long road to nowhere ... Some strange person amongst the zealots who never dreamed, claimed he received a letter in his mind, and took it at once to Mozzie Fishman ... Angel Day, he read, now lives indifferently to her surroundings, along a fast-flowing tidal river in a cold country which was a mystery to him. The green-grey foul-smelling river, carried along severed heads of domesticated animals, fruit crates from bustling marketplaces, rotting fruit and vegetables thrown into the river as waste, corpses of white people whose lives had not been considered by

¹¹⁶⁴ See chapter 2. Note also how Norm's conflict with the sea links to Mudrooroo's description of the sea as a male taboo area.

¹¹⁶⁵ 447.

¹¹⁶⁶ 16.

¹¹⁶⁷ 21.

¹¹⁶⁸ 39.

¹¹⁶⁹ 24-6.

anyone to be worth two bob, and the broken-hearted wares of many centuries of a poor civilisation. It was plain to see, Angel Day had gone overseas. The letter read that Angel shares her home, an abandoned grey warehouse with a moss-covered grey-tiled roof, with others like herself who had lost trust in humankind ... Time and again, he said he tried to ask her what she was doing there but she ignored him. Then, when some complete stranger came along and asked her the same question, she replied, 'Fishing for snakes.' Otherwise, she would have offered nothing.¹¹⁷⁰

Not surprisingly, "all [Norm's] obsessions of what was not right, were metaphors for his failed marriage" and thus inscribed in gender.¹¹⁷¹ This conflict is eventually mediated through his confrontation with the sea and the land. On his sea quest, Norm is haunted by a powerful vision of Angel as the "sea lady". The appearance of this "sorrowful woman, a cursed spirit of death who had come to find them"¹¹⁷² makes him realise that:

[t]he sea ... reminded him of how life is always haunted by death. How off-guard had Norm been when the dark shadow of the sea lady engulfed him—nobody would ever know ... A crackling feminine wail ran around him, embracing him, coaxing compliance to her desires. There was no denying it, the voice of the wind was relaying her needs ... Norm did stand, still as a statue, and looked into the sea as she beckoned for him to leap ... She knew too much. Naming the people involved, the pain and suffering inflicted, who fell, what misunderstandings lingered on and grew again like cancer, she was a running account of battles which had gone on for centuries. Minutes later she called him *War Lord*, and started naming his battles, showing him a celebration of his life in pain, while intertwining the speed of her dictation by whispering the way out, an escape from the same family wars continuing on and on. *Go on now, come out of the way of the unhappy dead, be with me ...* Caught in the sphere of the sea lady, Norm saw, over in the distance, ghostly dark waves moving like haunted spirits. In the air he heard a melancholy

¹¹⁷⁰ 454-5.

¹¹⁷¹ 246-7.

¹¹⁷² 245.

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 her army of mourning ladies ... This was how the opposing trade winds interlocked in war, blew the top of the lid, and out would fly the navigator's mental map of the groper's travel line.¹¹⁷³

Norm reaches Joseph Midnight's traditional island country after his exposure to death on his devastating voyage through the electric thunderstorm. Once on shore, he has to renegotiate his life with the land. Norm envisions the dangerous sea as a cruel woman out to kill him, and is lured by "the devil woman Gardajala singing out from the bush." This turns into a ritual sexual joining with bush nature: "he cried singing faster and thinking of her, wanting her, and she cried, until their ecstasy was consummated. Then, 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 solution of gender and tribal conflict is underscored by the unexpected appearance of his lost grandchild, Bala, "the child of hope," next morning.¹¹⁷⁴

As another result of his successful renegotiation with country, Norm's uncanny mythical encounter with nature's destructive and creative forces—life and death mediated through the four Classical elements of earth, fire, water and air—has developed into a devastating cyclone in retaliation for his White friend Elias's death. Norm's uncanny wrath, however, is inscribed into 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 Aboriginal activist who campaigns against Gurfurrit's destructive environmental policies. Despite father and son's profound differences on political engagement, this frames Norm's vengeful, uncanny magic within a politicised framework of ecological awareness and Indigenous environmentalism. An elusive ghost as well as an environmental terrorist, he is somewhat different from Mudrooroo's nihilistic postcolonising vampire: Norm as well as Will Phantom inscribe postcolonising violence into Indigenous renewal through the recuperation of the ancient, nurturing links to country. Samira Kawash writes:

¹¹⁷³ 261-5.

¹¹⁷⁴ 271-6.

The threat of decolonisation as Fanon describes it is the threat of the end of this world, a destruction necessary to clear the way for a new birth ... the terrorist is always more than the terrorist, always in excess ... In this sense, terrorism is a spectre that haunts social order and public safety ... 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.¹¹⁷⁵

Terrifying and haunting, destructive and dangerous, ubiquitous and elusive to White society, Norm and Will fit the excesses of the Freudian uncanny but are not excessive in an environmental sense. Benign, life-restoring ghosts rather than evil life-sucking vampires, they represent a postcolonising uncanny in that they restore the nurturing links between local country and Indigenous society. This life-restoring engagement is not only necessarily figured in the maternal but ranges into the racial as well.

6.3.1.2. *Will Phantom*

Will Phantom, whose name is indicative of his political commitment with the Indigenous cause as well as his uncanny ghostly non/presence in Uptown life, is responsible for blowing up the Gurfurrit ore pipeline that dominates the local economy and society. Having to disappear for some time, he joins Mozzie Fishman's travelling convoy which is engaged in a continental walkabout of Aboriginal regeneration. It reinstates "a major Law ceremony" along a Dreaming track that follows underground watercourses, and thus represents an extension of the Rainbow Serpent's tracks.¹¹⁷⁶ Will's absence from Desperance is perceived in haunting terms, similar to Kawash's: "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*."¹¹⁷⁷ Will's uncanny elusiveness is enhanced by the fact that no photograph of him exists and as a P/phantom, he is "invisible" due to his "too familiar" face. The latter ironically plays

¹¹⁷⁵ Kawash 1999: 238-9. See also chapter 4, p. 206.

¹¹⁷⁶ 119.

¹¹⁷⁷ 351 (my emphasis).

on the common racist stereotype that members of a different race all look similar: “Can’t tell them apart, never could.”¹¹⁷⁸

Will is an updated version of Norm who chooses his political strategies in response to the changing times. As such, he is another manifestation of the Rainbow Serpent, “[b]ased, it seems, on the real-life separatist guerrilla fighter, Murrandoo Yanner.”¹¹⁷⁹ Their generational conflict typically engages with differing attitudes towards contemporary issues affecting Indigenous life. In spite of its timeless feel, the novel’s timeframe can be tentatively set in the year 2002, fourteen years after the Bicentennial¹¹⁸⁰ and ten years after Mabo. It was a moment of neoconservative tenure favourable 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.¹¹⁸¹

Carpentaria mirrors the divisions over Native Title issues addressed in *Plains of Promise*, when the traditional tribal man Norm opposes the uncompromising Will over his land rights politics. These he disparagingly calls “that Southern black rights activism stuff,”¹¹⁸² and criticises his son for relying on what he believes to be urban modernity and uprootedness rather than traditional country and culture as a guide in life.

Importantly, Will further antagonises his father and tribal law by marrying Hope Midnight, Norm’s arch-enemy’s daughter, and fathering her son Bala. Although his quest

¹¹⁷⁸ 368. Wright plays on this stereotype in other subversive ways as well: one may wonder whether the White Uptown members do not look alike as the vast majority already carry the family name Smith.

¹¹⁷⁹ Devlin-Glass 2008: 13. She also comments that Murrandoo Yanner has actively campaigned against Century Zinc’s mining activity on Waanyi land and that his Rainbow Serpent tattoo appears on *Carpentaria*’s cover, merging with the image of the meandering Leichhardt River (13-15).

¹¹⁸⁰ 238.

¹¹⁸¹ 391.

¹¹⁸² 351.

will change his stance, Norm shows himself dangerously inscribed in essentialist visions of Indigeneity in this matter. According to him, the Midnights have:

... bad blood filtering through [their] veins ... [H]e 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.¹¹⁸³

Norm's understanding that Will therefore represents "a curse to the Gulf who had to be stopped," even by death,¹¹⁸⁴ emulates the rebellious character of Elliot in *Plains of Promise*:

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?"¹¹⁸⁵

However, Will is more positively inscribed than Elliott as it is he who bears the seed of Native survival by reuniting the formerly opposed mobs against the rigid, self-defeating attitude of his father. This is—yet again—underscored on the level of naming: 'Will' means determination; 'Hope' links to the recovery of the tribal location of D/Esperance;

¹¹⁸³ 510-11.

¹¹⁸⁴ 289.

¹¹⁸⁵ 203.

Bala is an Aboriginal word for ‘brother’ or ‘fella’;¹¹⁸⁶ and the chapter title “Bala, the child of hope” inscribes the h/Hope for survival into both the patrilineal and the matrilineal.

Not surprising for the way Wright stretches the imagination and epistemologies by crossing Dreamtime beliefs and Christian lore, Norm, the “sea king of fishing in the Gulf,”¹¹⁸⁷ 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 tension between death’s impotence and life’s regeneration. Whenever the Fisher King is wounded, generally in the significant region of the groin, 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.¹¹⁸⁸

Will’s political activism can be understood as a pragmatic reaction to the traditional values of Indigenous society, based on the outmoded sense of tribal honour exemplified in Norm and Joseph’s feud. An updated version of the tribal warrior, he attempts to restore Gulf country by shaking his father, the resigned king of fishing/kingfisher/Fisher King, back into agency; the latter should “take a reality check on the situation”¹¹⁸⁹ of his country and kin, and react. 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 realises 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.¹¹⁹⁰

¹¹⁸⁶ Sharp 2007: 64.

¹¹⁸⁷ 260.

¹¹⁸⁸ See Works Cited: “grail” and Weston 2008.

¹¹⁸⁹ 232.

¹¹⁹⁰ 378.

Cornered by the local mining's plotting against the Natives, Joseph Midnight is first to overcome the old feud with the Phantoms, realising he has to adapt his discourse to the new times in order to secure survival:

[O]ld man Joseph Midnight ... wandered in and out of his old bit of a lean-to home, The structure of tin and plastic, in an ongoing state of disarray, stood behind the brand-new house the government had given him free—lock, stock and barrel—for cooperating with the mine, but which he said, “Was too good to use.” His relatives, resigned to the fact that the old man was beginning to lose his marbles, took no notice ... Old man Joseph Midnight, heard speaking to his dead relatives as though he too was already dead, said his kinfolk were not worth two bob. “Look at us—we are just invisible people around here.” Watching him talking to the wind blowing through town back to the sea, the kinfolk said he had lost his soul ... He spat towards the new house whenever it caught his eye. He was suffering the unrelenting pain of a wrong decision.¹¹⁹¹

Joseph “loves the young rebel Will Phantom who had disappeared from the Gulf after being accused by the State government, and the Federal government too, of sabotaging the development of mining industry.”¹¹⁹² He needs him to recover Hope and Bala, sent to his traditional island country in the Gulf for protection but possibly caught by the Gurfurrirt company in an another attempt to trap the “terrorist”. Thus, he passes on an important, untravelled songline to Will so that he may reach Joseph's traditional homeland. This revelation of sacred/secret knowledge closes 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

¹¹⁹¹ 372-3.

¹¹⁹² 160.

hundreds of places in a journey to a place at least a thousand kilometres away across the sea.¹¹⁹³

Despite their conflict, Norm also offers Will protection and help in the realm of the Dreaming. Norm's protective presence on Will's walkabout cum quest through "kingfisher country" is uncannily echoed in a kingfisher bird acting as the latter's spiritual guide. The kingfisher is somehow connected to the total destruction of the mine after Will's capture at sea by mining officials,¹¹⁹⁴ and this forms the prelude to Desperance's life-restoring levelling by Norm's cyclone.

Obviously, Norm and Will's characters uncannily reconfigure the Holy Grail legend of regeneration into Postcolonising Dreamtime Narrative; *Plains of Promise's* plot of Ivy's life-giving secret and destructive powers are re-scripted along male ascendancy, and the story is shifted to the larger geographical focus of the interplay of land, 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 works towards through the inscription of several male quests circulating through each other. Norm's nautical walkabout to the site of his Groper Dreaming is triggered off by Elias's death, and develops into 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'; this follows a well-known false etymology of the Old French original which spells *San Gréal* as *Sang Réal*. Will's quest against the mine turns into a walkabout along Joseph Midnight's songline, which geographically converges with Norm's in the attempt to reunite himself with Hope and Bala. Nevertheless, it leads to his capture at sea and abduction to the mine. Will's liberation by Mozzie Fishman is celebrated with a devastating, orgasmic explosion of the mining complex. The cyclonic flattening of Desperance mirrors and magnifies this sense of freedom and announces Norm's healing return to agency and racial and gendered normality. No longer a phantom but returned to a tribal manhood of mythical proportions, his shamanic control of climatic conditions propels the continuation of his son's odyssey in search of his wife and grandson.

Significantly, the novel celebrates the finale of Norm and his grandson's odyssey with their return home, now the future site of Indigenous regeneration after the cyclone's

¹¹⁹³ 375.

¹¹⁹⁴ 394-7.

levelling impact. Meanwhile, Will incarnates yet another exhilarating metaphor of environmentally-aware Indigenous survival and renewal. Stranded as an Aboriginal Robinson Crusoe upon 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 of the sea/death and initiates her own quest to locate him at the novel's close, thus opening up the novelistic space for a constructive female inscription as well. Against the tantalising openness of *Plains of Promise's* end, *Carpentaria* offers hopeful closing images and counters the loneliness and lack of connection experienced between Ivy, Mary and Jessie.

6.3.1.3. Mozzie Fishman

One kinship line that does mirror 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 Aboriginal Lawman and close friend of Norm's who has embarked upon a crusade through Australia to preach his Indigenous creed:

Big Mozzie Fishman's never-ending travelling cavalcade of religious zealots ... once again was heading home, bringing a major Law ceremony over the state border. Bearers of the feared secret Law ceremony, these one hundred men were holy pilgrims of the Aboriginal world. Their 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 spiritual Dreaming track of the ceremony in which they were all involved, moved along the most isolated back roads, across the landscape, through almost every desert in the continent. The convoy, which had grown with cars of all colours and descriptions, kept a wide berth from the gawking eyes of white people's towns ... The crossing of the continent to bring the ceremony north-east to the Gulf, to finish it up, was a rigorous Law, laid down piece by piece in a book of another kind covering thousands of kilometres ... 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.¹¹⁹⁵

Implying a sense of sell-out, Angel's elopement with Mozzie, which also marks the moment of Norm's impotence or "loss of heart," takes place two days after Australia/Invasion/Sorry Day in the year of the Bicentennial.¹¹⁹⁶ 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-cast Aaron Ho Kum, whose father, Uptown's bartender Lloydie Smith, has rejected both him and his Aboriginal mother. Lloydie's denial of the Indigenous reality permeating the town is mirrored in his fatal love for a White chimera—a mermaid presumably living in the wood of his bar counter.¹¹⁹⁷ As with the invisible net, Lloydie's pathetic infatuation is another of the author's skilful, hilarious metaphors for the violently narrow-minded hypocrisy of small-town society in the outback. Such settler communities—as Desperance's mayor and police officer forcefully show—actively participate in 'black velvet', the sexual abuse and rape of Aboriginal women, while officially preaching Whiteness-only.

Lost between White and Indigenous society, the three boys become the easy target for Uptown's need to impose neat racial boundaries in the face of identitarian threat. The "vicious[-] killing" of the latest guardian of the invisible net, Gordie, the night when Norm Phantom takes Elias's body back to sea,¹¹⁹⁸ provokes their arrest by the town's constable, the oxymoronically named Truthful E'Strange. It also leads to a typical episode of Aboriginal 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 honour his name in employing the motto "*Hit first, talk later.*"¹¹⁹⁹ He consequently imposes his sense of local control, truth 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

¹¹⁹⁵ 119-24.

¹¹⁹⁶ 238-9.

¹¹⁹⁷ 472, 490.

¹¹⁹⁸ 310.

¹¹⁹⁹ 34, 327.

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.¹²⁰⁰

This gory scene, exemplary for the excessive nature of Bruiser's patrol of the borders of 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 uncannily 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."¹²⁰¹ Indeed, the police officer's insane care-taking of the boys' bodies exposes the brutal consequences of White politics of Aboriginal dispossession. A sense of their belonging is only restored in the Indigenous burial ceremony that Mozzie carries out 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"¹²⁰² and which is reminiscent of the mythical Hades, uncannily mirrors Elias's sea burial from a perspective of great loss and grief.

6.3.1.4. *Elias*

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. Elijah, of which Elias's name is derived, has often been taken as Jesus' Biblical "double".¹²⁰³ An uncanny messiah of sorts, Elias's presence is a catalyst for the conflicts

¹²⁰⁰ 335.

¹²⁰¹ Ferrier 2008: 48.

¹²⁰² 438.

¹²⁰³ See Works Cited: "Elijah." Also note that Elias bears the surname Smith, which emulates Jesus' first occupation, carpentry (Mark 6:3. See Works Cited: "Bible: King James version").

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 uncanny rewrite of Wright's previous novel's most conflictive male Indigenous character, as well as of the Biblical Saviour. Elias's presence in *Carpentaria* addresses the historical and geographical locatedness of identity formation, and thus the issue of authenticity, regarding the White settlers.

Elias's "hopelessly fight[-] to save his identity" after losing his memory 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 fact that the Uptowners have "originated from nowhere" so they logically recognise 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 minimises the importance of "[t]heir original forebear, a ghostly white man or woman, [who] simply turned up one day, just like Elias ... [T]heir history was just a half flick of the switch of truth—simply a memory no greater than two life spans."¹²⁰⁴ This White lack of local memory emulates the uncanny parameters of White identity formation on the national level, which is rooted in "the great Australian silence."¹²⁰⁵ 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 are attempts "to demean the Aboriginal people, and who we are in our culture, and to homogenise Australia" in mainstream terms, as Wright says.¹²⁰⁶

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 drowning is symbolically marked by a flash of lightning. It strikes into 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.¹²⁰⁷ The White concept of time is based on linear progress, whose lack implies stasis and death. From a Western perspective, the collapsing of local

¹²⁰⁴ 56-7.

¹²⁰⁵ The Australian anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner referred to the complete absence of the Native in the contemporary Australian History as practised by mainstream scholars (quoted in Attwood 1996: xiv).

¹²⁰⁶ Wright quoted in O'Brien 2007: 217.

¹²⁰⁷ 43-4.

history into a linear time-span of a mere two generations therefore verges on a deathblow to local Aboriginal culture and identity.

Significantly, 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.” This comment is footnoted as follows:

Dr M. Reay ... described the concept of common descent from a common mythic ancestor as: “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.*”¹²⁰⁸

This implies that Aboriginal history, memory and identity defy Western parameters of separation and contention and re-cycle themselves continuously. Uncannily, they are at once mythical and real, universal and local, ancient and contemporary, static and dynamic, and dead and alive. In *Carpentaria*, this is reflected in the structure of story-telling itself: its time setting is contemporary, but the novel reaches back into the past and

¹²⁰⁸ Wright 2001: 239 (my emphasis).

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 cacophony¹²⁰⁹ of bigger and smaller local voices which wash up on the Gulf's shore in perpetual tidal movement. 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.”¹²¹⁰

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 mythical 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 clear identitarian delimitations also makes him 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?”¹²¹¹ Not surprisingly, his job assignment as the local watchman and “guardian angel”¹²¹² is 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 turns against his lack of personal history. Significantly 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*.”¹²¹³ Unable to protect the town from harm, Elias is made the scapegoat for the fires and murders instigated by the scheming of the mining company, and his uncanny presence is exorcised by a drunken “kangaroo court ... at the pub” in an act of small-town bigotry.¹²¹⁴

Elias’s expulsion from Desperance as well as his posterior assassination at the hands of Gurfurrit are instrumental in Norm’s development, which denotes some kind of hybridisation that Norm carries into the reunion of the Phantom and 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[-]

¹²⁰⁹ Sharrad 2008: 14.

¹²¹⁰ Wright 2007: 85.

¹²¹¹ 62.

¹²¹² 76.

¹²¹³ 83 (my emphasis).

¹²¹⁴ 90.

his own,” and as “saltwater elective white ‘brother[s]’”¹²¹⁵ 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,”¹²¹⁶ but 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*.”¹²¹⁷

Norm is only shaken out of this sulky stasis—reminiscent of Ivy’s at Sycamore Heights—by his friend’s death, whose corpse Will has carried from a nearby lagoon to the taxidermist workshop where Norm now bides his lonely time. Thus, Elias’s Christ-like sacrifice becomes the uncanny 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 decision to engage in a marine walkabout cum funeral ceremony:

The gropers started to rise in the water all around the boat, mingling closer and closer than they had ever done in all of the years Norm had gone on this pilgrimage. Norm had been sure there was communication between the fish and Elias ... 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 gropers journeying from the sky to the sea were gathered. The gropers 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.¹²¹⁸

Uncannily, Elias’s corpse speaks back 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 shifts from a confrontation with Angel Day to a titanic battle with the sea and bush ladies, or the elements of water and earth in Western terms. Elias un-dead ghost, whose cathartic role is played out after initiating Norm’s recovery,

¹²¹⁵ Devlin-Glass 2007: 20.

¹²¹⁶ 96.

¹²¹⁷ 89 (my emphasis).

¹²¹⁸ 236-7.

disappears from the novel. The origins of Norm's Dreaming turn into the burial site of Elias's corpse and spirit:

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 ... Norm lifted Elias over the side of the boat and placed him into the strangely calm emerald waters. Elias sank deeper and deeper ... until finally, Norm could see him no more ... and was thankful he had brought his spirit safely to his final resting place...¹²¹⁹

Perhaps due to his utter solitariness, uniqueness and lack of personal history, Francis Devlin-Glass calls Elias "enigmatic" and "mysterious." She asks:

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 ...?¹²²⁰

All these considerations seem valid, and Wright's story-telling consciously plays on such associations in its uncanny effort to engage different epistemologies in a politics of Indigenous recuperation. However, it is perhaps fitting that in a novel that celebrates the survival of the Aboriginal world in the face of the imposition of Western civilisation, a White character makes the ultimate sacrificial gesture that in Biblical fashion redeems the Natives. 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, all the time, to bridge the gaps? It's Aboriginal people, ... [t]rying to help out, to show white people things, to educate, make space for others..."¹²²¹

¹²¹⁹ 251-3 (my emphasis).

¹²²⁰ Devlin-Glass 2008: 18-9.

¹²²¹ Scott 2000.

6.4. Towards a Political Ecology of Reconciliation

Carpentaria continues the uncanny intermingling of the Native and non-Native universes underpinning *Plains of Promise*; yet, it is in its hope-bearing concluding images of Aboriginal survival and regeneration that the former is much more unambiguously and positively inscribed than the latter. Francis Devlin-Glass claims therefore “a huge advance on her earlier novel: it is less reactive and more proactive in dramatizing indigenous epistemology and knowledge systems.”¹²²² Similarly, Carole Ferrier concludes that in the way “[s]ymbol, 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.”¹²²³

Intended as an evocation of the sovereignty of the Native mind, *Carpentaria* is greatly concerned with the search for an original and authentic Indigenous voice in literature. Ian Syson praises *Carpentaria* as “a remarkable and huge dreamscape novel ... The range and diversity of form, content and influences is astounding.” While 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,” his impression is closest to “an Australian epic.”¹²²⁴ Written in consonance with the parameters of the Indigenous oral tradition, it therefore “replicat[es] the story-telling voices of ordinary Aboriginal people whom [Wright] ha[s] heard all [her] life.”¹²²⁵ Wright consciously 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. I like sagas that can take days singing the story of a country.”¹²²⁶

Within the European literary tradition, a *saga* can be understood as a:

... genre of prose narrative typically dealing with prominent figures and events of the heroic age in Norway and Iceland, especially as recorded in Icelandic manuscripts of the late 12th and 13th century. Once thought to be

¹²²² Devlin-Glass 2007: 82.

¹²²³ Ferrier 2008: 49.

¹²²⁴ Syson 2007: 85.

¹²²⁵ Wright 2007: 84.

¹²²⁶ *Idem.*

orally transmitted history that had finally been written down, sagas are now usually regarded as reconstructions of the past, imaginative in varying degrees and created according to aesthetic principles. Important ideals in sagas are heroism and loyalty; revenge often plays a part. Action is preferred to reflection, and description of the inner motives and point of view of protagonists is minimized. Subdivisions of the genre include kings' sagas, recounting the lives of Scandinavian rulers; legendary sagas, treating themes from myth and legend; and Icelanders' sagas.¹²²⁷

Wright's *Carpentaria* fits these terms regarding its use of the Indigenous oral tradition, Indigenous heroes/leaders, their loyalties and disloyalties, the revenge theme, Aboriginal myth and legend, and its creation of a literary habitat through geographical locatedness. Wright also adds that *Carpentaria* draws on:

The everyday Indigenous story world [which] is epic, and ... follows the original pattern of the great ancient sagas that defined the laws, customs and values of our culture. The oral tradition that produced these stories continued in the development of the epic stories of historical events, and combining ancient and historical stories, resounds equally as loudly in the new stories of our times.¹²²⁸

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. 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 important epics and the main source of epic conventions in western Europe. These conventions include the centrality of a hero, sometimes semidivine; an

¹²²⁷ See Works Cited: "saga".

¹²²⁸ Wright 2007: 80.

extensive, perhaps cosmic, setting; heroic battle; extended journeying; and the involvement of supernatural beings.¹²²⁹

Wright's *Carpentaria* uses epic conventions in celebrating heroic achievements and treating themes of legendary significance such as the destruction of White civilisation and the survival of the Aboriginal 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 extended journeying in 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 makes *Carpentaria*'s uniqueness very clear in that Aboriginal 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, uncannily blurring the Western distinction between story and history, fact and fiction. Thus, *Carpentaria*, "a novel capable of embracing all times," is transgressive in that:

... this fictional work could not be contained in a capsule that was either time or incident specific. It would not fit into an English, and therefore Australian tradition of creating boundaries and fences which encode the development of thinking in this country, and which follows through to the containment of thought and idea in the novel. I wanted the novel to question the idea of boundaries through exploring how ancient beliefs sit in the modern world, while at the same time exposing the fragility of the boundaries of Indigenous home places of the mind ... 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.¹²³⁰

¹²²⁹ See Works Cited: "epic"

¹²³⁰ Wright 2007: 81-2.

The fictional strategy the author chooses is therefore a specifically local adaptation of South-American Magic-Realist writing, so that Ian Syson understands *Carpentaria* as “a major landmark in that genre,” while Wright “perfects 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.¹²³¹

Despite its expansive Indigenous inscription, some critics have pointed out that *Carpentaria* follows up on the structure, content, style, and humorous tone of the epic novel *Capricornia*, written some 70 years earlier by the mainstream author Xavier Herbert.¹²³² 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 cross-cultural contact through the issue of ‘black velvet’. Paul Sharrad notes some suggestive parallels in a paper entitled “Beyond *Capricornia*: Alexis Wright’s ambiguous promise”:

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

¹²³¹ Syson 2007: 85.

¹²³² See England 2006, Perlez 2007, Pierce 2006, Sharrad 2008 and Syson 2007.

predominantly dualist world of struggle and death, black and white, seen from a white male perspective, albeit a drily [*sic*] critical one.¹²³³

These echoes cause *Carpentaria*'s authenticity to be riddled by *Capricornia* to a certain extent, as Wright has never suggested her intention was to rewrite Herbert's novel. What is more, she hardly ever 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 she works from the sophistication of the ancient Waanyi story-telling tradition and a series of South-American, Magic-Realist authors¹²³⁴ to produce a provocative postcolonising tale that is familiar as well as strange.

Does the former imply that, rather than Indigenising the characteristics of a European-style epic, the similarities are uncannily coincidental, off-footing some readers into believing the case for an Australian precedent where none exists? While 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."¹²³⁵ This contradiction suggests that Wright insists on *Carpentaria*'s originality out of a concern to "create in writing an *authentic* form of Indigenous storytelling."¹²³⁶ She therefore denies the existence of a Western prequel, defies inscription into the Western literary tradition, and insists on an independent Aboriginal configuration of truth through fiction. No doubt Wright emulates the trickster figure in maintaining an uncanny silence on the question of *Capricornia*'s presumed precedent. This silence, however, is politically inspired and embedded in the problem of the uneven power balance underlying the hybridisation of Indigenous and non-Indigenous literary genres and content. Both of these the author is forced to work with when transposing the oral into the written. As Devlin-Glass holds:

¹²³³ Sharrad 2008: 7-8. Homi Bhabha coins the "third space" in an interview with Jonathan Rutherford, and describes its cultural hybridity in Fanon-like supra-dialectic 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" (Rutherford 1990: 211).

¹²³⁴ She mentions Carlos Fuentes, Gabriel Garcia Márquez, Edouard Glissant, Eduardo Galeano and Patrick Chamoiseau as important influences (Wright 2007: 82-3, 85-6; O'Brien 2007: 216).

¹²³⁵ Pierce 2006: 13.

¹²³⁶ Wright 2007: 84 (my emphasis).

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 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, but within both communities increasingly questions arise ... about the 'authenticity' of the 'translation' of mythic material into western representations ...¹²³⁷

Obviously the objective of authenticity can never be absolute in a global culture—let alone in an isolated culture—and must always be tainted as intercultural communication poises the oral against the written and rests 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 recognisably 'Aboriginal' to maintain its claim to a political agenda of enabling self-definition, to follow Michael Dodson's lead.¹²³⁸ Even if Wright did have prior knowledge of *Capricornia*'s content—and Sharrad 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-authorised*. 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 literary and oral traditions. It appears the author has been successful at this, as the landing of the prestigious Miles Franklin award may prove. The general public recognition of *Carpentaria*'s merits may thus serve to lay at rest the uncanny ghosts provoked by the *Capricornia* issue.

Wright has an idiosyncratic view of her epic's configuration; she visualises the novelistic structure and content resulting from "our racial diaspora in Australia" as "a spinning multi-stranded helix of stories ... 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,"

¹²³⁷ Devlin-Glass 2008: 4-5.

¹²³⁸ Dodson 2003: 39. See chapter 2, p.102 and chapter 4, pp. 155-7 for relevant quotes from his Wentworth lecture.

and is open to the inclusion of the “new” Australians.¹²³⁹ Emulated in *Carpentaria*, this helix foregrounds the Indigenous perspective within the uncanny coexistence of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal epistemologies, mixing Dreamtime, Christian and Classical lore. Francis 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.”¹²⁴⁰ Indeed, readers of *Carpentaria* must work hard to make sense of its uncanny heteroglossic tapestry of intermingled accounts in which the true heroes are marginalised Indigenous tribesmen;¹²⁴¹ tribal guerrilla warfare develops into heroic acts; language mixes mainstream English and Aboriginal speak; everyday reality blends with the Dreamtime; quests develop out of old and new songlines and walkabouts; and its supernatural powers simultaneously emulate 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 Aboriginal self-definition and self-determination onto European conventions that it inscribes itself into the peculiarities of Postcolonising Dreaming Narrative.

Thus, Craig San Roque views the ways in which *Carpentaria* reveals its uncanny truths for mainstreamers as unique:

Carpentaria's writer ... brings that which is unconscious to conscious formulation ... and releases the fragrance of a hidden country for the guidance and benefit of others ... [T]his is one of the most eloquently written and most kindly books ever yet produced from the antipodes ... reiterat[ing] the need for the development of the capacity for concern for others in a time of devastation. *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.¹²⁴²

¹²³⁹ Wright 2007: 84.

¹²⁴⁰ Devlin-Glass 2007: 83.

¹²⁴¹ Wright says that “[m]y hope was that the novel would allow a space where Indigenous heroes are celebrated” (2007: 85).

¹²⁴² San Roque 2007: 10-13.

San Roque's reference to *Totem and Taboo* raises a sensitive point in the discussion of the uncanny, as he positions the novel as Freud's essay's "direct counterpoint"; *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-20th-century anthropological sources from Australia. In chapter 2 we saw how *Totem and Taboo* does not only spur an analysis of the uncanny along the axis of gender, as in Hélène Cixous' approach, but also of race by linking the 'primitive' (figured as the savage, the unconscious as well as the repressed) to the ethnic. In Freud's account it is foremost in this racial aspect that the structural links of the uncanny with gender (through oedipal blindness, fear of castration and death) and class (through the exclusion from access to (post)colonial means of production and accumulation) are substantiated. Through the maintenance of the capital penalty for incestuous behaviour, tribal Indigenous peoples prove they have not yet managed to control the incest wish, unlike Westerners. As Freud considers the management and sublimation of the oedipal incest wish at the root of all human civilisation—art, society, religion, justice, ethics—the imposition of patriarchal and colonial authority are conflated and justified; this, in turn, creates a social underclass of 'primitive' Natives in alleged need of Western civilisation for the management of their so-called child-like state. Thus, it is mainstream initiative and control that is put in charge of their purported progress and improvement modelled on the West's example. Aileen Moreton-Robinson writes to this effect that "the belief that the assumption of patriarchal white sovereignty is morally right and legally correct" has as its consequence that "[t]he 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."¹²⁴³

In the face of the havoc wreaked by the Western irruption into Indigenous Australian societies, the use of Postcolonising Dreaming Narrative necessarily turns *Carpentaria* into 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

¹²⁴³ Moreton-Robinson 2008: 100.

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.¹²⁴⁴

Wright professes herself “very disappointed” with the state of government policies and public resources for Aborigines, of which she said as recently as 2007, “I think we’re at an all-time low now.”¹²⁴⁵ Published under conservative tenure in 2006, *Carpentaria* can be seen to denounce the neo-colonial powers in contemporary Australia that marginalise, objectify and stifle the Indigenous world out of agency. Such neo-colonialism is given fictional shape through the manipulations of the multinational Gurfurrit mine against Native Title and through the impact of small-town racism. Truly postcolonising, the novel mobilises the uncanny through Dreaming Narrative so as to question the race, gender and class divisions that hold such exploitative relationships in place. It engages with readership by proposing a return to a holistic understanding of man and nature, and by creating contemporary story lines and structures recognisably drawing on Australia’s oldest cultural heritage: the Aboriginal secret/sacred.

Wright centres her discourse on an enabling, centring view from the fringe, but works across different cultural frameworks to create a textual embodiment of “strange cultural survival.”¹²⁴⁶ Thus, she also cleverly engages 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 uncanny 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 Norm’s, Will’s and Mozzie’s journeying. 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

¹²⁴⁴ Wright 2007: 80-1.

¹²⁴⁵ O’Brien 2007: 218. No doubt this comment was partly inspired by the 21-June-2007 invasion of the Northern Territory by the conservative Howard government, after insistent rumours and reports about child sexual abuse in remote Aboriginal communities—for extensive criticism of these governmental actions, see Jon Altman & Melinda Hinkson 2007 (eds). *Coercive Reconciliation. Stabilise, Normalise, Exit Aboriginal Australia*. North Carlton: Arena. Note also Marcia Langton’s recent 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” (2008: 155, 158).

¹²⁴⁶ Bhabha 1990b: 320.

Will's haunting terrorism in the service of the recovery of the ancestral link to country and Native community. It is addressed in the inscription of the father-son-grandson triad/trinity in the Fisher King myth and Aboriginal regeneration. It comes to the fore in the wish-fulfilment of Gurfurrit's and Desperance's destruction and in traditional country's renewal as the signified of the area's uncannily ambiguous belonging to end-times and new times. It is also apparent in Angel's merging of Christian and Aboriginal beliefs and conversion into a White ghost only appearing in dreams. It reveals itself in Elias's Biblical sacrifice to redeem a lost Aboriginal 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 towards an enchanting siren trapped in the wood of his bar top, perhaps the product of alcoholic delusion.

Highlighting the impact of the Aboriginal sacred in contemporary Australian society, Francis Devlin-Glass addresses Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs':

... startling claims to the effect that indigenous bids for the recognition of sacred sites and objects has had a crucial effect in "recasting ... Australia's sense of itself." This state of affairs is all the more remarkable in that a scattered, fragmented and disadvantaged minority has so successfully unsettled powerful and moneyed hegemonic interests (especially those of graziers and mining companies, among the wealthiest groups in the community).

Thus she asks, "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 worldwide, and more importantly ... in contemporary literary artefacts?" Positing the Aboriginal sacred as a "continuing site of contestation," she traces the powerfully uncanny, transformative effects of its presence in Australian literature through the trope of the Dreamtime, and highlights Alexis Wright's last novel as a prime example.¹²⁴⁷ Similarly, Craig San Roque understands *Carpentaria* to circulate amongst readers as a "sacred object," as its composition is "part novel part sacred story" worth visiting from

¹²⁴⁷ Devlin-Glass 2008: 1. She quotes from Gelder and Jacobs' *Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity in a Postcolonial Nation* (1998: xi). Within this perspective she also discusses Kim Scott's *Benang* and Xavier Herbert's less known *Poor Fellow, My Country*.

time to time.¹²⁴⁸ As an *objet trouvé*, Wright's transforms the perceived beauty of her homeland¹²⁴⁹ from a found object of Aboriginal spirituality into an uncanny *founding subject* of postcolonial identity formation reminiscent of *Benang*'s subversive proliferation on Australian bookshelves and minds.¹²⁵⁰ Indeed,

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.¹²⁵¹

The promiscuous, boundary-crossing character of *Carpentaria* across divisions of race, gender and class, despite its overriding concern with male Indigenous quests into traditional country, is manifest in the way Norm and Will work towards enabling versions of Indigenous manhood. Wright's focus on male quest in this novel may also 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. Indeed, 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 that "Hope is tied in to options for change."¹²⁵² 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 fertile Ark of Noah composed of Desperance's remains. It is a safe reminder that "[t]his object is put together by Alexis in her state as a Waanyi woman, mindful of her grandmothers, and

¹²⁴⁸ San Roque 2007: 16.

¹²⁴⁹ 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."

¹²⁵⁰ See chapter 5: pp. 220-1.

¹²⁵¹ Wright 2007: 83-4.

¹²⁵² Ferrier 2008: 47-9.

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.”¹²⁵³

The sophistication of Wright’s epic “resistance writing,”¹²⁵⁴ 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 free from a crippling discourse on Indigenous authenticity rooted in essentialist identity politics. While recognising the perceived incommensurability of Indigenous and non-Indigenous epistemologies in its treatment of time and space,¹²⁵⁵ *Carpentaria* works towards closing the Eurocentric gap between the oral and written, tradition and modernity, nature and human, fact and fiction, the past and present, and story and history. Uncannily inscribed in a holistic cycle of destruction/renewal and life/death, *Carpentaria* is a grand “micro-narrative”¹²⁵⁶ against the race, gender and class binaries underlying the Western distinction between Self and Other (or World) through a strategic employment of Dreamtime tropes. Not only do these link to the past, but “[k]nowledge 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,”¹²⁵⁷ thus leading to a dynamic, performative politics of the Aboriginal sacred in fiction. And as Michael Dodson writes:

... 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.¹²⁵⁸

Foregrounding the importance of an Indigenous epistemology of managing country over Western paradigms but also working towards their reconciliation, Wright holds that:

¹²⁵³ San Roque 2007: 16.

¹²⁵⁴ Ferrier 1992: 215.

¹²⁵⁵ Devlin-Glass 2007: 83.

¹²⁵⁶ Lyotard 1984: xxiii-iv.

¹²⁵⁷ Moreton-Robinson 2007: 31.

¹²⁵⁸ Dodson 2003: 10.

... 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.¹²⁵⁹

From this uncanny perspective of Aboriginal truth, which turns White end-times into Aboriginal 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, “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.¹²⁶⁰

The positive reception of the novel by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians suggests *Carpentaria* brilliantly achieves this objective.

¹²⁵⁹ Wright 2007: 92.

¹²⁶⁰ O’Brien 2007: 218 (my emphasis). 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” (2006). Murrandoo Yanner and Clarence Walden are Waanyi activists to whom the novel is dedicated (see footnotes 1179 and 1249).

Chapter 7

Postcolonising Dreaming Narrative: 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’” (Kim Scott 2003: 452)

“... 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” (Deborah Rose 2005: 303)

“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” (Alexis Wright quoted in Vernay 2004: 121)

7.1. The Politics of Genre

In this dissertation, it has been my aim to show how Indigenous-Australian writing develops from the liminality of the Indigenous fringe into a proper genre with a unique content and agenda. I have also argued that this genre cannot be subsumed under Western definitions of literature such as the Fantastic, Gothic and Magic Realism but should be considered in the light of the particularities of the Indigenous story-telling tradition, its environmentalist epistemology and the political impetus towards Native survival and recovery within the Australian mainstream nation space. This idiosyncratic literary development in Australian Letters ties in with a firm agenda of Aboriginal self-determination and self-definition,¹²⁶¹ which has found its way back into literature by means of the textual treatment of place, identity formation, cultural heritage, historical memory, genre and style as interlocking principles. The conflict raised by the adaptation

¹²⁶¹ See Michael Dodson’s seminal 1994 Wentworth lecture; authors like Scott and Wright clearly pick up on these issues in their fiction.

of Indigenous orality to Western written forms (or rather its reverse), worded as the tension between ‘White Forms’ and ‘Black Content’ by Mudrooroo in 1985,¹²⁶² has found an appropriate answer in the novelistic innovations of Aboriginal literature over the last two decades.

As I have argued in chapter 2, this answer has been most saliently configured through the literary manifestation of the uncanny, as it interrogates imported European models of (self-)knowledge, (self-)definition and (corpo)reality from an Indigenous-Australian perspective. This interrogation does not accept Western models as superior but confronts it with an Indigenous epistemology rooted in the sacredness of country. In a postcolonising context that primes unassimilable difference over assimilable diversity, it is the manifest incommensurability of these two understandings of the world that causes the uncanny to appear as one view is defamiliarised by the o/Other. And it is this same incommensurability that allows the repressed epistemology of the Secret/Sacred to spill over the confines of its minority position and activate alternative meanings and understandings; thus, it may confront and rewrite the Western model of production and control of knowledge, bodies and resources in Australia and speak out within and without the island-continent’s confines.

Within contemporary Australian literature, the uncanny solicitation¹²⁶³ of Aboriginalist¹²⁶⁴ structures is performed in a range of Indigenous texts which for the purpose of their joint analysis in this dissertation I have grouped under the generic qualification of *Postcolonising Dreaming Narrative*. The choice of *Narrative* in this phrase aims to bridge between a written and oral concept of literature, which presents text as a narration or story to be told.¹²⁶⁵ In the light of the etymological relationship between

¹²⁶² Van Toorn 1994: 46. She refers to an article under the same title published by Mudrooroo in: Davis, Jack & Bob Hodge (eds.). *Aboriginal Writing Today*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1985. 21-33.

¹²⁶³ To “solicit” is a Derridian term used by Gelders & Jacobs in their study *Uncanny Australia*; “solicitation” connotes an uncanny process of mutual incitation, attraction, concern and disturbance (1998: 21-2). The source text is Derrida’s “Différance” (1970), published in *Margins of Philosophy*. Harvester Wheatsheaf, Hertfordshire 1982.

¹²⁶⁴ Hodge & Mishra: 1990: 27-30.

¹²⁶⁵ The *Literary Dictionary* defines narrative as “a telling of some true or fictitious event or connected sequence of events, recounted by a narrator to a narratee (although there may be more than one of each). Narratives are to be distinguished from descriptions of qualities, states, or situations, and also from dramatic enactments of events (although a dramatic work may also include narrative speeches). A narrative will consist of a set of events (the story) recounted in a process of narration (or discourse, in which the events are selected and arranged in a particular order (the plot)). The category of narratives includes both the shortest accounts of events (e.g. the cat sat on the mat, or a brief news item) and the longest historical or biographical works, diaries, travelogues, etc., as well as novels, ballads, epics, short stories, and other fictional forms” (see Works Cited: “narrative”).

the verbs ‘to narrate’ and ‘to know’,¹²⁶⁶ the use of *Narrative* also aims to highlight literature as a means of transferring epistemological knowledge from one field of experience to another. Thus, the combination *Dreaming Narrative* also aims to profile the uncanny role of the Aboriginal Secret/Sacred in the transferral of such knowledge.

The use of the present participle *Dreaming* emphasises the Aboriginal Dreamtime as actively engaged with the past and present and, hence, as open to adaptation and change rather than frozen in folkloric myth. Indeed, *Dreaming Narrative* is a concept whose incommensurable complexities should not be underestimated. It receives its deepest significance from the holistic epistemological bonds with country it denotes, which heightens its potential to mobilise the uncanny. As Francis Devlin-Glass writes:

The terminology *dreaming/dreamtime* 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.¹²⁶⁷

¹²⁶⁶ Via Latin: *gnarus* = “knowing”, which relates to *narrare* = tell, recount, explain, relate > literally, “to make acquainted with” (see Works Cited: “narrative”).

¹²⁶⁷ She continues to define the complexity of the Dreaming by paraphrasing Deborah Rose: “In *Nourishing Terrains*, Debbie Bird Rose does not define the term (it undoubtedly resists definition), and devotes many chapters to delineating the multiple functions/ontologies of dreamtime narratives. In her formulation, Dreamings construct Country as sentient, living, responsive) (ch.1); are sacred sites (ch.3) and confer ownership and authority in relation to both the sites and narratives about them (ch.4). They are constructed as dynamic: able to move across country in the form of a track (ch.1), find expression in ritual, song, dance (ch.3); often act according to gender rules (ch.4). They perform culture and history by embodying the belief that long ago, human and other-than-human creatures (e.g., bird, insect, fish, animal, but also climatic effects) started human society (myths of origin in western terms?). The ‘differences established in Dreaming are differences which generate mutual interdependence’, thus creating an ethos and economy of exchange and interrelationality (ch.5). Dreamings also constitute an epistemology and a sacred ecology by constituting the Law for a particular language group, that is, the rules, and inherited teachings on how to behave (ch.3) and teach how all creatures act according to their natures (ch.4). They attest to the origin of all foodstuffs and sometimes how they are to be safely consumed; tell of the specific relationships between place and animals (ch.4). They also constitute a holistic system of beliefs, incorporating a sense of the interrelationships of such empirical and non-empirical phenomena as land, kinship, food sources, law, geological formations, effects of the weather (ch.4), and in their interrelationships enact a unified ecological field (ch.5) (D. B. Rose). What is striking about this list of functions is its diversity and what is fundamental to it is relatedness, or better, *interrelationality*: 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

Finally, the addition of the present participle *Postcolonising* follows Aileen Moreton Robertson's understanding of Australian postcoloniality as unfinished and in process, where Natives (and non-Natives) are still to be seen as decolonising.¹²⁶⁸ The uninterrupted processual nature of Australian postcolonisation creates an uncanny Native/non-Native interface of cultural exchange based on their respective difference: it is a contact zone of incommensurable worlds bound to get on in the same nation space.

In such a dynamic view of "strange cultural survival,"¹²⁶⁹ *Postcolonising Dreaming Narrative* acquires a literal as well as literary meaning.¹²⁷⁰ The first draws attention to Aboriginal literary output as the uncanny manifestation of a process of rewriting Australianness; through literature, individual and communal Indigenous-Australian identities are actively 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 Aboriginal Secret/Sacred in Australian Letters through its generic adaptation of non-Native to Native forms and content; by rewriting genre, it configures an uncanny First-Nation¹²⁷¹ inscription of literature in its epistemological link with Australian country.¹²⁷²

This double bind across the literal and the literary brings us back to the Aboriginal corpus in its broadest sense. The instances of what I have analysed as *Postcolonising Dreaming Narrative* constitute a body (*corpus*) of Indigenous writing that performs the re-inscription of Indigenous bodies (*corpora*) into the Australian landscape and textscape after two centuries of colonialist erasure policies. As I have argued in chapters 4 and 5, the processual, changing nature of this re-inscription 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 a lost biological essence.

epistemological impasse for westerners which poets and prose writers have sought to bridge" (Devlin-Glass 2008: 2-3; for Deborah Rose's text, see Works Cited).

¹²⁶⁸ Moreton-Robinson 2003: 30, 37.

¹²⁶⁹ In his essay "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation," Homi Bhabha "suggest[s] no salvation, but a strange cultural survival of the people. For it is by living on the borderline of history and language, on the limits of race and gender, that we are in a position to translate the differences between them into a kind of solidarity" (Bhabha 1990b: 320).

¹²⁷⁰ One can consider "postcolonising" transitively (so dreaming narrative is postcolonising Australia) or intransitively (it is dreaming narrative itself that is becoming postcolonial).

¹²⁷¹ In general, the original inhabitants of settler nations are often called First Nations. In this conception of Postcolonial Dreaming Narrative, White Australian nationalism is uncannily turned on its head. In Western countries, Literature developed as a school and university subject on the wave of 19th c. nationalism.

¹²⁷² I consciously choose 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 a Native notion with all the epistemological connections of habitat and interconnectedness that implies.

Deconstructing essentialist notions of race as well as gender and class, it activates “temporary closures”¹²⁷³ of Indigenous identity strategically while insisting on internal differentiation. In order to mobilise those political, legal, financial, economic and cultural resources that allow a re-conversion of Terra Nullius in Terra Aboriginalis, Indigeneity must be asserted but not fixed. As Michael Dodson says:

... I cannot stand here, even as an Aboriginal person, and say what Aboriginality is. To do so would be a violation of the right to self-determination and the right of peoples to establish their own identity. It would also be to fall into the trap of allowing Aboriginality to be another fixed category.¹²⁷⁴

The two-fold inscription of the Indigenous Australian corpus into Postcolonising Dreaming Narrative as oeuvre and corpo-reality allows us to trace and summarise these changes in recent Indigenous Australian writing, as well as to understand its generic and thematic interconnections.

7.2. Life-Writing and Postcolonising Dreaming Narrative

The four authors discussed in this dissertation have all addressed the genre of life-writing but in decidedly different ways, determined by their personal circumstances and the socio-historic moment of conception and publication of their fiction. In the 1980s, the auto/biography became a popular means of self-expression amongst Aboriginal women from both a rural and mixed urban background. It called attention to the harsh terms of the Indigenous life experience within the White nation-state, which was nevertheless growing increasingly sensitive to the Indigenous plight. Soon known as ‘Aboriginal life-writing’, it concentrated on life stories told by the protagonists themselves, often from the part-Indigenous perspective of the Stolen Generations, such as Sally Morgan’s *My Place* (1987), Glenyse Ward’s *Wandering Girl* (1987), Ruby Langford’s *Don’t Take Your Love to Town* (1988), Dorothy Hewett’s *Wild Card* (1990) and Doris Pilkington Garimara’s *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* (1996).

On occasions written down and edited by mainstream intermediaries, Indigenous life-writing has been far from impermeable to mainstream attempts at avoiding

¹²⁷³ Slater 2005a: 70 (my emphasis).

¹²⁷⁴ Dodson 2003: 39 (my emphasis). Full quote in chapter 2, p. 102.

responsibility for the Native plight. The life stories' presumed faithful reflection of actual lived experience and the purported honesty and truthfulness of auto/biography, used to denounce Aboriginal genocide, dispossession, removal and slavery, allowed critical scrutiny and questioning of the Indigenous text and its author on 'objective-scientific' grounds. The latter has been exacerbated by the authenticity debate, in which the discussion has concentrated on Indigenous experience as either essentialist or performative, as well as by the discovery of some intentional literary hoaxes involving non-Native authors who fraudulently used Native identities to further private interests.¹²⁷⁵ Hence, the inherent Realist transparency of life-writing incremented its vulnerability to denialist attitudes and policies of assimilative thrust within the essentially unaltered context of White dominion of Australia's political, economic and cultural resources. Consequently, Aboriginal authors have written themselves into and out of life-writing in a variety of ways, and parallel to life-writing, fictional accounts of individual and communal Indigenous experience have developed—as in the cases of Scott and Wright—to thwart mainstream resistance to racial/ethnic re-mappings of Australian cultural territory.

As we have seen in chapter 3, Sally Morgan's *My Place* played a salient though disturbing role in bringing to light the hidden tensions in Indigenous life-writing, as it placed itself on the uncanny White edges of the genre and therefore easily reached and engaged mainstream readership.¹²⁷⁶ On the one hand, her instance of life-writing was emblematic in bringing the plight of the Stolen Generations to the nation's attention at a sensitive moment of Australian self-assessment provoked by the Bicentennial. On the other hand, Sally's auto/biography's purported 'meek' reconciliatory content combined with the universal opportunity it offered for 'facile' identification with its Westernised, hybrid protagonist, and thus allowed mainstream readership to wash its hands from the damage inflicted upon the Aboriginal population over decades of child-removal policy. This fed back into a mixed reception within the Indigenous community, who questioned

¹²⁷⁵ 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 to the Pitjantjatjara people in 1949 who had been raised by White foster parents after being taken away from her mother in 1950. The novel was successful and landed a literary 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 (Van Toorn 2000: 42-4).

¹²⁷⁶ Not surprisingly, the Indigenous academic Jackie Huggins wonders why *My Place* has become such a "holy" text about Aboriginality amongst mainstream Australians (Huggins 2003: 62).

the text's liberating impetus regarding the politics of sexual blame and guilt which had fixed Native women and their hybrid offspring in victim roles.

Morgan's recovery of her Aboriginal heritage through mere genetic connections proved somewhat miraculous and, hence, inauthentic to a range of Aboriginal and enlightened mainstream commentators. Logically, the equation of inauthenticity to hybridity regarding Morgan's person had extended itself to the public assessment of her book. It presumably mirrored her life as a-not-so-White suburban middle-class female at a two-generation remove from the actual moment of child removal. Indigenous critics spoke out against its inscription into an agenda of Aboriginal emancipation, largely doubting whether Morgan's retrieval of Indigeneity could be considered genuine and instrumental. Aboriginal scholars would no doubt agree with Jackie Huggins that "Aboriginality cannot be acquired overnight. It takes years of hard work, sensitivity and effort to come back in."¹²⁷⁷ And no less than Marcia Langton would they be disturbed by the fact 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'."¹²⁷⁸ As identity is the result of social as much as biological inscription, Morgan's Aboriginality can only be convincingly expressed through her commitment to the Indigenous community and agenda in the years posterior to the writing of *My Place*. As I have argued in chapter 3, this lived experience has effectively been added to her self-definition but perhaps not taken enough into account up to now.

Similarly, *My Place* could be re-assessed as a necessary step on the way towards a story-telling fashion that primes Aboriginal over Western form and content while effectively speaking out to both audiences. By looking at its hybrid traits, which try to bridge between the Western written and the Aboriginal oral tradition, *My Place* displays its uncanny interfacial character. *My Place* is in reality a fringe phenomenon in the realm of auto/biography by the way it defies a single narrative perspective and blurs the neat borders between genres. As an exploration of a lost, hidden 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, uncannily displaying a hitherto silenced history of Native community. Finally, the text incorporates

¹²⁷⁷ Huggins 2003: 62.

¹²⁷⁸ Langton 1993: 29-30.

elements of the Aboriginal Sacred as well as the Gothic, moving into the realm of Magic Realism and Fantasy.

This blurring of genres is on a par with a calculated use of polyphony, in which Morgan's voice gives way to her peers' as she slowly moves in on the core of her family's dark secret (identity). Thus, the textual body is steadily un-Whitened as the stories unfold, and Morgan's initially gullible attitude towards her identity is put to work as a fictional, narrative device in the dis-covery of a dark mystery. The use of polyphony is coherent with the Indigenous story-telling tradition in that stories are kept in custody rather than owned, so that their telling should take place respecting Native 'copyright' or protocol. Thus, *My Place* reveals itself as a contrived document that draws on both the Native and non-Native 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 perhaps belies the apparent mainstream ease with which the text and her identity have been read. Drawing on an uncanny finale inscribed in the female Gothic, the novel offers no closure as Sally's Aboriginal grandmother's last devastating secret—the possibility of her having mothered a large string of incestuous hybrid offspring—is never revealed. This non-revelation to uninitiated readership respects the principle of custodianship and the secrecy of the Aboriginal Sacred, and acts as a sensible measure of self-protection. As Nan/Talahue holds the key to Sally's hybrid configuration of Indigeneity, these features inscribe the novel into Postcolonising Dreaming Narrative.

As discussed in chapter 4, Mudrooroo also draws on auto/biography in his Tasmanian quintet, but shows himself severely affected in a reversal of the parameters underscoring Sally Morgan's quest for identity. The Australian legal and political interpretation of the Commonwealth definition of Indigeneity boosts the three elements of descent, self-definition and community acceptance. Thus, Mudrooroo's Aboriginality has been under scrutiny by a *strategic* employment of a politics of the Indigenous-Australian body that demands some kind of genetic inscription as well as an Aboriginal life experience. Although Mudrooroo ostensibly spent his younger years as a member of the Stolen Generations and was assigned (and accepted) an Aboriginal identity, the apparent lack of a Native bloodline in his descent has led to his person and Australian corpo-reality to be seriously questioned. Ostracised as an Aboriginal spokesman, his oeuvre has been discredited,¹²⁷⁹ and his personal plight has undoubtedly shaped the

¹²⁷⁹ With the exception of his 1990 seminal study of Aboriginal literature *Writing from the Fringe* (Wildburger 2003: 100; Sharrad 2008: 15).

agenda of the last three volumes of his Tasmanian quintet, which spans almost 20 years of literary activity.

Mudrooroo fictionalises and rewrites the biographies of three historical figures in the White conquest of Tasmania, the White missionary-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 aim is to rewrite the official mainstream account of Tasmania's benign settlement and remap the island with its Natives by re-interpreting these three characters and embedding their adventures in an alternative Indigenous History. From *Dr Wooreddy* (1983) to *Master* (1990) the series clearly develops in a postcolonising direction, reversing Gothic narrative and incorporating the Dreaming to suit an agenda of Aboriginal empowerment. However, the publication of the last three titles in the so-called vampire trilogy coincides with the Mudrooroo Affair; this can be seen to taint the author's prose with heavy Gothic tint, forecasting the destruction of all identity pasting the impact of vampiric non-signification over the Dreaming.

On the final count, Aboriginal characterisation in the quintet and Mudrooroo's personal identity problems circulate through each other in uncanny ways, reflecting the author's desperate attempt to carve an Australian space out for himself through fiction. Whereas Sally Morgan manages to make a tentative step towards an Aboriginal identity through her fictionalised auto/biography, Mudrooroo can be understood to write himself out of Indigeneity as the series progresses. Its penultimate volume, *Underground* (1999), parodies life-writing through the 'autobiographical' account of George, the half-caste son of Trugernanna and Wooreddy's fictional alter-egos, born out of an affair with George Augustus Robertson but adopted by Jangamuttuk. Against expectations perhaps, Mudrooroo's self-identification does not lie with this lonely, lost character. It should rather be sought in the African Wadawaka, who has been adopted into the mob and whose increasing importance in the story matches and compensates Mudrooroo's public downfall by creating a fictional Australian space for the author. Tentatively, Mudrooroo's identitarian location also collapses with an uncanny space of non-signification similar to Amelia's, the White vampiress who invades George's life story with her own autobiographical account. She acts and moves beyond race, gender and class distinctions and considerations, representing a desperate wish-fulfilment of sorts for the author. This reading is underscored by the fact that Amelia and Wadawaka join forces on the last pages of the series' final volume, *The Promised Land* (2000). In a sense their

mating/coupling, almost forced upon them by the colonial circumstances, represents a grim new beginning for Australia which sadly subsumes the Aborigine—an alternative ‘new times’ to which the author, whose personal involvement in this fictional narrative is hard to deny, may subscribe.

Mudrooroo’s particular employment of life-writing necessarily moves in the terrain of fiction as it cannot retrieve an Aboriginal identity for the author. Nevertheless, grounded in a wrought theoretical basis—a politico-literary agenda he coined Maban Reality in emulation of Magic Realism—his uncanny fiction boasts features that inscribe it into Postcolonising Dreaming Narrative. 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 and in the way this uncanny interrogation of race spills into the terrain of gender and class, Mudrooroo’s Tasmanian quintet should be understood to be postcolonising. Yet, while *Master* is decidedly groundbreaking in its treatment of Indigeneity, up to what point the Gothicised end of the series allows an empowering Indigenous Australian inscription remains doubtful; Mudrooroo’s prose seems to signal towards the complete destruction of identity rather than its strategic employment in the service of the political empowerment of the Indigenous community. That such critical deconstruction has its own merits is nevertheless manifest in Annalisa Oboe’s appreciation that Mudrooroo’s fiction is “so productively impure.”¹²⁸⁰

Kim Scott is, like Sally Morgan, an urbanised third-generation victim of the Stolen Generations, and as such, an uncanny Whitened Native. As argued in chapter 5, no doubt influenced by the critical reception of the first wave of life-writing, he chooses to approach Aboriginal identity formation by focusing life-writing through a fictional lens. Yet, this does not prevent him from firmly anchoring himself in ancestral country and community, after a long and tedious process of tracing back his Native roots. Convinced that “in writing fiction I get a chance to be more true than the truth”¹²⁸¹—an opinion shared by Alexis Wright—Scott’s two novels to date experiment with style, genre, socio-political history and personal biography to give Indigenous substance to his Westernised identity.

¹²⁸⁰ Oboe 2003: xvii. In 2003 she edited a volume of essays dedicated to Mudrooroo’s “mongrel signatures”, a reappraisal of his writing with international contributions.

¹²⁸¹ Kunhikrishnan 2003.

In *True Country*, Billy Storey's quest for an Indigenous Self in the Western Australian outback emulates Scott's own teaching experience in the Kimberley, which formed part of an unfruitful search for his Aboriginal roots. *True Country* acts, in this sense, as personal wish-fulfilment since Billy's Aboriginal heritage is firmly established at the end of the novel. As Billy is a fictional character, the success of his search cannot serve to inquire into the state of Scott's Indigeneity. Thus Scott solves the problems experienced by the likes of Sally Morgan, whose lived experience is under scrutiny through the text, or of Mudrooroo, whose wishful thinking writes him into the vampiric. *True Country* (1993) can be seen to rehearse the elements that give *Benang* (1999) its distinctive qualities: polyphony over single narrative perspective, Dreaming over Christian belief and myth, inscription in community and country, local stories over White history, custodianship of culture and country over ownership, and personal involvement of the author.

Benang is a much more ambitious literary project which reflects Scott's extensive research into his family's records and the official files pertaining to the period of eugenic policies in Western Australia. Scott's aim is no less than using eugenic language against its users so that the Stolen Generations can be freed from their stigmas and their heritage activated in the service of Indigenous survival and recovery. Not surprisingly, therefore, *Benang* is published in the aftermath of the *Bringing-Them-Home* report (1997), dealing with the Plight of the Stolen Generations. In this novel, the fictional protagonist, Harley, successfully manages to retrieve an Aboriginal identity against the devastating impact of the eugenic project to 'breed the Native out' through the Stolen Generations. On a textual level this is evidenced through the use of non-linear narrative and polyphony, which allows the author to re-compose a sense of individual and community out of the collapse of history. On the human level this is forcefully given shape in Harley's transformation into a *djanak* or Aboriginal shaman, who from the uncanny Whiteness of his hybrid identity 'sings' the country and its people back into place—that is to say, by emulating the sounds and features of the land, sea and its flora and fauna, wholesome nurturing bounds between country and humans are re-established. For its uncanny employment of the Dreaming and empowering recovery of the sign Aboriginal, Scott's fiction moves far beyond autobiographical life-writing into the parameters of Postcolonising Dreaming Narrative.

As discussed in chapter 6, 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 Aboriginal rights in the mid and late 1990s but also coincides with the *Bringing-Them-Home* report. With the clearly fictional context of *Plains of Promise*, Wright may be understood to respond to traditional forms of life-writing which place the text and its author under scrutiny. While she is a fourth-generation victim of dispossession and child-removal, her link with next-of-Aboriginal-kin was never severed, so that there is no need for her own Indigenous identity to be the object of novelistic research. Thus, her prose relies on a fully fictional account of the only-too-real story of Aboriginal loss and despair to be told. As she writes herself:

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.¹²⁸²

Plains of Promise operates as fictional life-writing in staging an urbanised second-generation member of the Stolen Generations in search of her Native identity; however, it also contains the elements of an Aboriginal family saga, quest narrative, Christian myth, murder mystery cum detective story, the Gothic, the oral tradition and Dreaming. The novel is powerfully engaged with the operation of the uncanny, and defamiliarises mainstream readership from knowledge, understanding and solutions to the problematic issues of identity formation and Aboriginal survival addressed in the novel. The end of the novel defies closure and is tantalisingly ambiguous. In its activation of the uncanny not only non-Native readership is addressed but also the text's hybrid protagonists, which heightens the sense of alienation caused by the presence of the unfathomable, incommensurable world of the Dreaming. Aboriginal empowerment is ambiguously inscribed in this text, which reflects Wright's critical attitude towards and disappointment with Native and non-Native politics regarding the Indigenous body at that particular stage of Australian history; but inasmuch Western understandings of literature and identity/Indigeneity are defied, *Plains of Promise* inscribes itself as Postcolonising Dreaming Narrative.

¹²⁸² Wright 2002: 13.

In *Carpentaria* (2006) Alexis Wright's defiance of Western form and content comes to its full thrust. Scripted as a story of country, Wright leaves the plight of the Stolen Generations behind to concentrate on an Aboriginal origin story anchored in community. Wright's depiction of Native traces on an ostensibly Whitenized landscape and of its recovery as Indigenous country for the Native community through the engagement of the Dreaming is ground-breaking in its possibilities for Aboriginal empowerment and agency. Rather than personal life-writing, which after all is a Westernised genre concerned with individual development and progress, Wright's story functions on the level of community and its indelible, nurturing links with its ancestral land. Using a holistic approach that collapses different realms of knowledge into a non-hierarchical whole, Wright composition fully develops an epic songline into new literary territory for Aboriginal writing: Postcolonising Dreaming Narrative.

7.3. Land and Country

As instances of postcolonising literature written from an Indigenous point of view, the works dealt with in this dissertation not only powerfully engage with race but also with gender as well as class. They blur these binary categories through the activation of the uncanny, triggered by a Native inscription in country as the unifying, levelling principle. Ruby Langford Ginibi lays her finger on the incommensurable epistemological difference in the conceptualisation of the earth as 'land' or 'country' when she writes: "I thought of the difference between white people saying '*I own* this land' and blacks saying '*We belong* to this land'."¹²⁸³ Land and country belong to two manifestly different worlds of experience as one—Western—is hierarchic and stratified 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 classicist stratification of society. The latter inscribes human presence collectively into the custodianship of a larger sentient ecosystem/habitat which organises and sustains its parts non-hierarchically in terms of mutual support and respect rather than individual profit and use; hence, the re-inscription of 'country' interrogates and levels the binary categories associated with 'land'.

The novels discussed engage with the uncanny recovery of the Aboriginal heritage by priming a Native palimpsest over a non-Native tabula rasa conception of (hi)story, re-inscribing Terra Nullius as Terra Ab/originalis and re-instating land as country. Thus,

¹²⁸³ Ginibi 1988: 262 (my emphasis).

they dis-cover the very existence of White culture on Australian soil as an imposition unable to erase the inscription of an older, pre-existing culture never relinquished or forgotten. They also turn the White account of benign settlement into harmful invasion as they recover the voices and traces of Aboriginality on 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* and *Plains of Promise*—is ambiguously co-inscribed as its *recovery*. Tabula rasa narrative implies a complete imposition of cultural acquisition leading to the destruction of previous identity, that is, nurture over nature; palimpsest narrative presupposes cultural erasure's imperfect character and, thus, nature over nurture. The implication is that, in the case of the Stolen Generations, nurture uncannily serves to acquire as well as retrieve an already pre-existing Aboriginal identity. The rediscovery of Indigenous identity as nature as well as nurture, essence as well as performance is therefore ambiguous; it reflects the current application of a strategic politics of the Aboriginal body that mobilises a genetic interpretation of the concept of descent as well as a dynamic social definition in terms of self-definition and community acceptance.

Sally Morgan's reconstruction of her Aboriginality is foremost constructed along matrilineal lines by the dis-discovery of an uncanny secret guarded by her maternal grandmother. This provides the novel with its gendered inscription as it is foremost a story by, about and for women. Morgan's text shows that the plight of the Stolen Generations is emphatically configured round the severed relationship between mothers and their hybrid offspring, which haunts the latter's identities with uncanny intensity. Notably, Morgan refuses the Freudian, Oedipal inscription of her generational narrative, in which her own White father figures as a failure and her maternal White grandfather as an incestuous pervert. Both the failure of one and the sexual abusiveness of the other are inscribed in notions of class; the former is an impoverished lower-class and sexually-traumatised war victim, the latter an empowered member of one of Western Australia's wealthiest pastoral families who used part-Aboriginal girls as sexual and domestic slaves. Attempts of the Drake-Brockmans to defy 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 into a more culturally-inscribed direction.

Taking Sneja Gunew's words into the literary field, Morgan's novel steers away from "paternal confusion" and celebrates "maternal promiscuity."¹²⁸⁴ In recovering her Native family line, she reverses the traditional conviction that sexual abuse implies blame and shame for the female victim rather than the victimiser, and defies the Biblical account that Woman is to blame for the sin of Man. As Wenche Ommundsen writes, "[R]eal 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."¹²⁸⁵ Morgan makes a tentative start with such a relocation of identity by locating her Native ancestors' homeland in the Pilbara; if this reconnection with a story of country and kin rather than with oedipal narrative had not happened, "[w]e would have survived, but not as whole people. We would have never known our place."¹²⁸⁶ Connection to land in this vision is inscribed in holistic belonging and communal custodianship rather than individual ownership of culture and its material supports.

Mudrooroo's Tasmanian quintet initially locates the possibilities for Aboriginal 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 Trugernanna, so Mudrooroo has been criticised for giving his agenda of Aboriginal 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 towards a vampire trilogy 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 colonisation—emulated in Jangamuttuk's control of the gullible White pseudo-Biblical trinity Fada-Mada-Sonny—and the uncontrollable Gothic violence and gore that is to follow. Not surprisingly, this return to the Gothic in the vampire trilogy coincides with the full impact of the Mudrooroo Affair and conservative federal tenure.

Observers generally agree that Mudrooroo's aloof male-chauvinist hard-liner attitude, emblematically staged in his disparaging treatment of Sally Morgan's *My Place*,

¹²⁸⁴ Gunew 1990: 100. See also chapter 2, p. 84.

¹²⁸⁵ Ommundsen 1993: 262-3.

¹²⁸⁶ Morgan 1988: 231-3 (my emphasis).

has not been helpful in gaining support in his racial/ethnic plight. Feminist Australian scholarship has long been at odds with him and highlights the disturbing links between the personal and the fictional in his oeuvre. Thus, Maureen Clark establishes an uncanny 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 space of race, gender and class terror.¹²⁸⁷ More uncannily even, if we can understand the fictional space of the vampire trilogy to mirror 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 into the feminine but engulfed by the White female abject, the author announces a rather terrifying dissolution of race and gender identity which nonetheless represents a 'solution' for his elusive shiftiness.

Of additional importance in the development of the quintet is the issue of class in the characters of George Augustus Robinson and Amelia Frazer, whose lower-class background should not be underestimated in their respective colonial ambitions. Robinson is the typical colonial parvenu whose cottage welfare industry over Native backs makes 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 categories of class as well as of gender and race, which centres the focus of change in vampiric matrilineal proliferation. If, indeed, Mudrooroo inhabits the fictional space created for his postcolonising vampire, we can understand him to haunt Australia's identity debate from a non-location which sucks all meaning into non-signification, rewriting country uncannily as a 'black w/hole'.

Moving from the sad loss of the Native homeland in *Dr Wooreddy*, the series peaks towards the promise of identity's communal inscription in country in *Master*, 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 following 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 halfcaste vampire George, the infected hybrid seed of Aboriginal survival remaining on the island continent, is

¹²⁸⁷ Clark 2006: 122.

incorporated as a mere pet into Amelia and Wadawaka's 'nuclear family'. While offering a 'strange cultural survival' for his own identity, Mudrooroo shows no hope, understanding or mercy for the people that have largely disowned him, and writes them out of Australian territory in retaliation. Not surprisingly, the image of Australia we receive in *The Promised Land*'s last line is of a "dismal colony."¹²⁸⁸

Kim Scott's recovery of his Native heritage ostensibly develops along patrilineal lines in both of his novels but this is out of respect for the protection and custodianship of sensitive material rather than male chauvinism. Scott feels he is not empowered to deal with a world of experience not his own: *Benang* "is told from a male point of view, where I hope that it would be respectful of those older Noongyar women but it doesn't enter into their consciousness as it does with the males that are depicted."¹²⁸⁹ Like Scott himself, Billy Storey starts his search for Indigeneity running up against his status as a Westernised urban middle-class professional. Nevertheless, *True Country* eventually locates Billy's Aboriginal 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 at the hands of his White grandfather's colonial project of racial elevation. Harley may only achieve some form of Native inscription by tracing his Indigenous ancestry to an original mother figure beyond the White paternal line; it is his great-great-grandmother Fanny Benang (signifying "Tomorrow") who not surprisingly gives the title to the novel which denotes hope for the future. Yet again, the matter of White 'paternal confusion' created by hidden hybrid offspring is solved by coming to terms with Native 'maternal promiscuity', since the official eugenicist qualification of "notorious prostitute" for Fanny is rewritten.¹²⁹⁰ It is by reversing the blame and guilt for the practice of 'black velvet' to White patriarchy itself that solutions for the Stolen Generations and their offspring must be sought, as *Benang* so eloquently spells out.

Scott's inscription in the maternal ties in with a wider, levelling inscription of Indigenous identity into country. In agreement with some Aboriginal women's voices heard in *Benang*, Scott manifestly sees his fiction as stories "about place, and what ha[s] grown from it."¹²⁹¹ Thus, *True Country* is not an individualised account of but a dialogic communal effort at establishing Indigeneity, supported in stylistic devices such as

¹²⁸⁸ Mudrooroo 2000: 231.

¹²⁸⁹ Buck 2001.

¹²⁹⁰ Scott 2003: 106.

¹²⁹¹ Scott 2003: 452.

polyphony and Aboriginal forms of English. Scott wanted the novel “in the form of its telling [to] suggest[-] something of being claimed by a heritage.”¹²⁹² Thus, Philip Morrissey says “[t]he 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.”¹²⁹³ *Benang* expands on these features by breaking away from progressive, linear story development as well; the process of establishing a Native 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”¹²⁹⁴—horizontal denote maternal, rhizomatic proliferation.¹²⁹⁵ On the final count, *Benang* suggests that people do not own the land but that it owns them, turning them into its guardians for the common good rather than into its usurpers for selfish gain. In becoming an uncanny *djanak*, able to move within and above the landscape, Harley assumes custodianship of country and performs postcolonising ceremonies that sing the land and its life forms out of (neo)colonial dislocation and back into place, with all the blurring of imported race, gender and class hierarchies this entails. Significantly, the hybridity of his new identity is underlined by his capacity to move in both the horizontal and vertical plane, occupying three-dimensional space at will.

Alexis Wright’s fiction works on both sides of the gender divide: whereas *Plains of Promise* engages with a matrilineal story of three generations, *Carpentaria* focuses on three generations of Aboriginal males. Her first novel questions the politics of blame and guilt connected to the creation of the hybrid offspring of the Stolen Generations, and it problematises the role of Native and non-Native males in the survival of Aboriginal society. Not surprisingly, the uncanny 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 relentlessly caught up in the almost irreparable damage inflicted by Western colonisation. While the text delivers an uncanny inscription of these three hybrid females in country through a powerful life-giving Dreaming secret, it also critically interrogates Native dealings with a politics of gender and refuses facile one-to-

¹²⁹² Scott 2007: 3.

¹²⁹³ Morrissey 2000: 319.

¹²⁹⁴ Scott 1999: 29.

¹²⁹⁵ See chapter 5, pp. 262-6 and 281.

one solutions to the complex issue of what Michelle Grossman calls the different versions of “received Aboriginality” addressed in the novel.¹²⁹⁶ In *Plains of Promise*, Indigenous identity formation and the way it engages with the havoc wreaked by the Stolen Generation policy upon Native women remains a matter of open 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 Aboriginal Self.

Carpentaria manages a more optimistic inscription of Indigeneity by concentrating on a line of three generations of male Natives in their successful fight to overcome the internal division of the Aboriginal community and to undo the imposition of White culture, propelled by White middle-class values of land use, onto their traditional area. In seeing Norm, Joseph and Will working constructively towards empowering definitions of Indigenous manhood by restoring their nurturing links to country, Wright aims to de-demonise Aboriginal 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 Bala (signifying “fellow” or “brother”¹²⁹⁷), which rises out of the destruction of White colonisation on the coast of Desperance and re-unifies the local Aborigines. This trinity’s tight bonds are emblematic for the hope they embody for Aboriginal 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,”¹²⁹⁸ it is by no means less unsettling in its deconstructive holistic impetus towards the empowerment of an Aboriginal cosmogony of the Australian land.

7.4. End Times and New Times

The significance of these novels for the constitution of an Indigenous Australian corpus is given by their blurring, levelling, and hence *postcolonising* 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, the appearance of the uncanny implies un/belonging; hence it ambiguously is (not) and defies definition. As a fuzzy fringe concept, the uncanny is necessarily a dynamic,

¹²⁹⁶ Grossman 1998: 85-7.

¹²⁹⁷ Sharp 2007: 64.

¹²⁹⁸ Wright 2006: 12.

transitional term since its manifestation in postcolonial fiction—the so-called 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 in the process of being rewritten by their exposition to a postcolonising Other.

The disturbing character of the uncanny directly engages with our perception and reception of these instances of postcolonising literature: they may estrange us from known frames of reference and hence cause 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 racialised, gendered, classicist Self to the Other and so on. It re-packs hierarchically-organised, discrete binaries as interdependent wholes whose internal configuration is subject to adaptation, dissolution and change; thus, it pushes binary principles of organisation into an unaccommodating terrain of non-signification that may ‘voice’ what a prevalent ideology’s imperfect representation of reality has suppressed, to follow Slavoj Žižek’s analysis.¹²⁹⁹ For our postcolonising purpose, the anguish caused by non-signification 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 2, in fiction, and particularly the postcolonising fiction under discussion in this dissertation, the space non-signification occupies beyond (colonial) discourse may be scripted figuratively, and return the ghostly as the uncanny mediation between life and death, between signification and its lack. Thus, the postcolonising ghost participates in the demise of the colonial and the birth of the postcolonial simultaneously: end times and new times uncannily circulate through phantasmagorical (non)existence.¹³⁰⁰

My Place stages ghosts—considered embodiments of the uncanny in fiction *par excellence* by Hélène Cixous¹³⁰¹—so as to activate the re-inscription of race, gender and class. The need to retrieve the maternal in identity formation is emphasized by the ghostly development of Sally’s father’s character and by the uncanny Gothic presence of her White grand-father Alfred Howden Drake-Brockman in her family history. A victim of White working-class impoverishment and of sexual trauma by his war experience, Bill Milroy develops a state of mental non-presence which becomes increasingly frightening and eerie as the story unfolds, and heavily suggestive of domestic violence. Sally’s

¹²⁹⁹ Žižek 1994: 25-6.

¹³⁰⁰ I borrow the terms “end times” and “new times” from Craig Saint Roque (2008: 4).

¹³⁰¹ Cixous 1976: 542-6. See also chapter 2, pp. 47-9.

Aboriginal grandmother also turns the domestic setting into a ghostly realm of haunting as she defies Sally's attempts at revealing her most intimate secrets relating to repeated incest and multiple hybrid offspring. Thus, *My Place* mobilises the Gothic to depict the defamiliarising effect of vexed sexualities on the postcolonising home-setting. However, *My Place* also stages ghosts on a meta-fictional level, as the elderly Aborigines who have given their life stories in Sally's custody speak out to readership 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,¹³⁰² and the Aboriginal corpses testifying to the impact of racial politics may be re-integrated into a Native corpus of Postcolonising Dreaming Narrative. This offers possibilities for the uncanny to be activated against deadly stasis and for a dynamic performance and re/inscription of hybrid Aboriginalities such as Morgan's personal biography over the last two decades testifies to.

Mudrooroo mobilises the ghostly in a variety of ways to address the issue of identity formation and Aboriginal survival. *Dr Wooreddy* and *Master* depict the confrontation of colonisers and colonised in a narrative that works from Gothic disempowerment of the Natives towards a recovery of their forces through the incorporation of the Aboriginal Sacred. Their shamanic leaders engage in battles with the White missionary couple in the terrain of the Dreaming, and come out 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, translating in end times for the former, new times for the latter. However, *The Undying*, *Underground*, and *The Promised Land* see a return to the Gothic by a full immersion into the violent gore of the colonial vampire whose powerful presence spells out a bleak future for Indigeneity. Thus, the Tasmanian quintet displays a circular movement into Aboriginal disempowerment where change may only be achieved in the dissolution of all identity; it proposes an utterly new, undefinable corpo-reality in tune with the author's personal need for an utterly deconstructive politics of the body.

Following Fanon's thought on instrumental and absolute violence in the process of decolonisation, we can understand the author's use of the iconic Victorian character of the vampire to point beyond sexual, class and racial signification. The vampire, an un-dead creature that preys on the blood of the living, metaphorically adjusts itself to the

¹³⁰² Hills 1997: 108.

eugenic obsession with ‘the purity of blood’ with which race relations were managed during most of Australia’s Victorian and post-Victorian occupation, and thus it haunts essentialist notions of the current debate on Australianness. Speaking from the uncanny realm of non-signification, the haunting vampiress represents Mudrooroo’s utterly de(con)structive contribution to the Australian identity debate and comes to a reckoning with a conception of Indigeneity that largely excludes him. Thus, the vampire trilogy traces a fictional songline strewn with Aboriginal corpses, not the least the author’s own, whose Native corpo-reality is suspended. The threesome develops towards Aboriginal death and end times, while it portrays the new times for Australianness as nihilistic and uncertain. This ending appears to tie in with Samira Kawash’s belief that:

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.¹³⁰³

Thus, the Australian physical and literary corpus that may postcolonise out of these new times remains uncannily undefined, inspiring hope and fear for the future at once. To be or not to be Aboriginal is the question that remains tantalisingly unanswered in Mudrooroo’s fictions.

On the other hand, Kim Scott’s engagement with the uncanny realm between life and death is undoubtedly empowering for the Aboriginal community. Scott scripts this alternative discursive space straightforwardly as the realm of the Dreaming in both *True Country* and *Benang*. In the first novel the concept of the Dreaming is wrapped into Western experience as premonitory dreams in which the world of Aboriginal experience manifests itself to Billy. Yet, when they connect to his Aboriginal grand-uncle Walanguh, who appears as a ghostly character floating between life and death, the novel develops towards a Native epistemology which speaks back from an uncanny in-between space to mainstream discourse. Billy moves from the incomprehension of his dreams to a full understanding of the Dreaming, or from Native non-signification to signification. This immersion into a different world of experience is consumed in Billy’s own confrontation

¹³⁰³ Kawash 1999: 255-6. See also chapter 4, pp. 208-17.

with the uncanny space between life and death configured by the river. In his confrontation with the meandering Rainbow Snake Billy has to prove his worthiness to Indigeneity, and only thus fully enters 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 uncanny scene of rebirth that *Benang* starts off, setting Harley out on a physical and spiritual journey into a hybrid form of Aboriginality. As the first-white-man-born-into-the-family Harley is familiar with the worlds of both Native and non-Native experience, and his uncanny expression of Indigeneity allows him to turn into a ghostly shaman or *djanak* with the power to 'sing' the Westernised Australian land back into Native country. The new songline he plots into Australian territory allow 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 Native corpses resulting from the genocidal experiment of absorption into the White mainstream may join their hybrid voices to reconstitute an Aboriginal corpus of stories inhabiting the Australian land. Scott's postcolonising fiction, though consciously written from a male perspective, actively engages with Native empowerment in a performative dynamics that leaves room to recover the sign Aboriginal from an inclusive point of view.

Alexis Wright's fiction configures a meeting with the ghostly realm between life and death that moves from the Gothic to a full immersion into the Dreaming. *Plains of Promise* stages ghosts that shuttle between the Gothic and the Dreaming. The Aboriginal universe in the novel is filled with eerie people, animals and plant-life that often signify in incomprehensible, uncanny ways to the mainstream reader. An exemplary specimen of hybrid non-signification is configured by the Chinaman's ghost, who speaks out from the realm of the dead to the living with an uncanny truth: all are to blame for his gory assassination, perhaps the most Gothic passage in the text. His uncanny denunciation of the rejection of hybridisation as a valid cultural option aligns itself with the overall drive of the novel to spare neither Native nor non-Native society where identity politics are concerned. Thus, the Chinaman's comment also addresses and criticises Ivy's figurative death. A maddened victim of the ostracisation of hybridism by Native and non-Native society, Ivy appears as a pale ghost at the end of the novel and uncannily connects the past to the future, deracination to origins, and end times to new times. Her monstrous appearance defies her real significance, which is therefore not fully understood by her

uninformed daughter and granddaughter, who consequently leave their traditional homeland in the hope of being reconnected to country and kin in an unforeseeable future. Whether the novel spells hope or misery for the Stolen Generations and Indigeneity at large is uncannily left in the middle in this blend of postcolonising Gothic and Dreaming narrative. Yet again, to be or not to be Aboriginal remains an unanswered question.

Carpentaria does not engage the Gothic but displays all its metaphysical characters in their connection with the Aboriginal Sacred. The novel stages a powerful inscription into end times for White civilisation and new times for Aboriginal Australia by the supernatural destruction of Desperance and its mining economy. Defying epic Biblical accounts of Western civilisation's supremacy, *Carpentaria* presents itself as an uncanny Antipodean counter-narrative, an alternative origin story that slowly meanders through Gulf Country. The mythical Rainbow Serpent of the Dreaming gave birth to the Aboriginal universe and its epistemology, and Norm and Will Phantom turn into its contemporary (super)human manifestations. Norm and Will are, as their family name indicates, ghosts that speak and act back from an uncanny realm of non-signification suppressed by Western epistemological discourse. Ambiguously furnished with destructive as well as life-giving shamanic potential, they reverse the vampiric thrust of colonisation in their terrorisation of White society and mission so as to return life to the Indigenous community.

Beckoning towards mainstream understanding, the novel musters up the combined force of the four Classical elements of fire, water, air and earth to sign White civilisation's death warrant and recover the Australian land as Aboriginal country in a climactic finale. Thus, *Carpentaria* becomes "a swelling, heaving, tsunami of a novel"¹³⁰⁴ that collapses White history and myth into the Aboriginal Dreaming and rewrites the past, present and future of the land. In its adaptation of Western genre and myth to Aboriginal form and content, *Carpentaria* constitutes an emblematic example for the possibilities of Postcolonising Dreaming Narrative to remap Australian cultural, textual, bodily and geographical territory into the Indigenous universe. By performing the re-establishment of environmentally-sound, life-restoring connections between humans and country through the literary, Postcolonising Dreaming Narrative turns from an uncanny manifestation into a canny manifesto of epistemological difference.

¹³⁰⁴ Grossman 2006.

7.5. Antipodean Lessons

Australia is generally imagined as a society based on European core values, boasting a system of participative democracy based on the individual freedom and equality of its citizens. However, Australia is not a typical member of the category ‘Western societies’ due to its marginal, Antipodean location and demographic particularities. While its foundation as a White nation has its origins in the penal-colonial vicissitudes of poor criminalised Metropolitan outcasts, its postcolonising efforts to be “truly the land of the fair go and the *better* chance”¹³⁰⁵ do not outdo its European peers in providing equal opportunities for its population. Its traditional self-definition as a Western nation primes male Anglo-Celtic middle-class values but hides the uncanny traces of the underprivileged First Nations’ older presence. Yet, in recent times, Indigenous Australians have been able to make claims on national identity from a process of official recognition of their time-immemorial history of cultural and physical belonging to country. While the Aborigines occupied the Australian continent forty to fifty millennia before Europeans first settled it in the late 18th 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 legal support and turned what the European settler deemed home more unhomey, revealing a contested palimpsest of Native belonging to country.

The Australian identity debate also has an international front. White Australia has always aimed to contain the blurring effects of non-European immigration on national identity through the application of policies with different degrees of assimilative thrust from the moment of Federation in 1901, developing into multiculturalism as of the 1980s. As First Nations enjoying settler primacy, the Aborigines have been arguably misplaced into multiculturalism, at bottom a policy geared towards the integration of immigrants from different cultural backgrounds into mainstream society on the recognition of cultural diversity; this mis/placement has poised the mainstream effort to accommodate Indigeneity into the settler nation and recover it in/for Australia against a singular Native fight to rewrite Australianness from a position of prior Indigenous situatedness. Despite appearances, Australia should therefore be considered an uncanny fringe member of its class, a condition which heightens its potential to express the uncanny tensions in national self-definition which more prototypical members of Western societies are

¹³⁰⁵ Keating 1992 (my emphasis).

perhaps less visibly subject to. In touch with incommensurable cultural difference, the make-up of Australia's physical and cultural space(s) pushes identity trouble to extreme positions of conflict.

As I have set out in chapter 1, one of the salient features of Europe nowadays is a generalised fear of loss of a sense of belonging, quality of life and privileges which is tied in with the processes of increased global migratory movement, economic dislocation and the Old Continent's supranational integration. This anxiety has provoked a reactionary battle to contain the uncanny 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 uncannily mirrored in Australia, whose two-century-old history of intercultural tensions and contested reversal of settler primacy may help to resituate the European identity debate in terms of performance rather than a return to essence. 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 onto the land with Native blood? The answer is not in the attempt to efface cultural difference by imposing the majority culture onto newly-arrived cultural minorities but in jointly negotiating new cultural spaces within the sustainability and co-inhabitation of the land. In Australia, Aboriginal resistance to White settlement normally produced itself only when such a negotiation failed to obtain and unilateral White occupation threatened to expel the Natives from their natural habitats.¹³⁰⁶

Hopefully the previous chapters have convincingly argued that the parameters of any identity debate do well to veer away from essentialism and immanent biological difference. There exists no framework of originality and authenticity which marks some people as better or worse 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 re-invented and therefore always prone to change.¹³⁰⁷ Charles Darwin already entertained the suspicion that race as such does not exist, and biological variety within and across species has been found to perform on a genetic

¹³⁰⁶ Inga Clendinnen's *Dancing with Strangers* (2003) delivers a fascinating and convincing recreation of the processes of occupation and intercultural (mis)communication upon first contact in the present day Sydney area, and mixes historical records with current anthropological knowledge.

¹³⁰⁷ See chapter 2, pp.88-94.

continuum rather than through its discrete presence or absence.¹³⁰⁸ Similar observations can be produced regarding class, once a category based on immanent features such as aristocratic blood,¹³⁰⁹ the merchant's innate greed, the working-class's lack of intellectual skills 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 lesser fluid category: once it was considered a natural, biologically-ordained distribution of role patterns between both sexes but nowadays the understanding of male and female behaviour is seen as culturally rather than genetically inscribed. This leaves the question why the Indigenous Australians may mobilise their 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.

7.5.1. Minority versus majority discourse

Aborigines have long been the victims of the colonialist thinking that defined them as less intelligent, less human, less apt for survival and therefore unworthy to occupy a place in Australia as citizens amongst citizens, and arguably this is still the case. Rather, as a lesser life form officially subsumed under Australian fauna, their presence was conveniently believed to disappear from the face of the earth to accommodate a higher evolutionary form—the European. Among those ethnic groups trying to carve out an existence in Australia other than Anglo-Celtic and Western European, the Natives have undoubtedly suffered most in the last two-hundred years, easily outdoing non-Western-European immigrants. This intense suffering was provoked by the colonial thrust of the British Empire, whose need to sustain its own 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 amongst the colonised, who in Orientalist vein were consequently seen as racially inferior to the invaders. In order to take legal control of the Australian landmass it was absolutely imperative for Empire to create the fiction of a Terra Nullius, the myth of a human tabula rasa which could be occupied peacefully. In other words, the Indigenous Australians had to be dehumanised in order to justify their disappearance from the colonial map of the continent's human occupation.

¹³⁰⁸ Darwin had already argued against the idea of race in his *Descent of Man*, published in 1874 (Gardiner-Garden 2000).

¹³⁰⁹ Anderson 1991: 150.

Extermination was already common practice amongst 19th c. settlers who hunted Aborigines down so as to erase their presence from the land. Opportunist human scaling, reminiscent of the Great Chain of Being,¹³¹⁰ was later backed up by the Social-Darwinist thought that gave rise to official policies of genocide in the service of a White(ned) Australia. In the 20th century, the Australian application of eugenics produced a disenfranchised underclass of dispossessed ‘full-blood’ racial rejects retained in mission-reserves while many ‘hybrid’ Aborigines were selected on skin colour and factions for ‘biological absorption’ into the White race through institutionalised removal, also known as the Stolen Generations. After the fascist horrors of the Second World War, whose holocaust had profiled the inhuman end result of eugenics, absorption changed its face for the more socially-focused concept of assimilation—and disappearance—into the mainstream by means of the incorporation of Aborigines to the liberal philosophy of the market place.¹³¹¹

The recovery of Aboriginality in recent decades has been the result of the resistance to this process of cultural and demographic erasure, and after the protest movements of the 1960s, multiculturalist social engineering has attempted to find an answer to the Aboriginal (mis)fit into the nation using respect for cultural diversity as a key concept. Aboriginal 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 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 for improving the abject living conditions of this minority making up just over half a million people or 2.5% of the total Australian population.¹³¹²

¹³¹⁰ 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 unnamed, formed the epistemological background to Renaissance and Enlightenment thought, and still informs many of the hierarchies we apply in Western-based analysis (Lakoff & Turner 1989: 213).

¹³¹¹ Dodson 2007: 25.

¹³¹² The Australian Bureau of Statistics summarises 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

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 Aboriginality based on descent, self-identification and community recognition. Although the concept of descent is open to biological and/or social interpretation, in Australia it remains biologically tainted in the realm of Indigeneity. While the Commonwealth interpretation is “more social than racial”¹³¹³ and supported by the vast sway of Indigenous Australians, many of them insist upon a—however remote—genetic link in addition to recognised lived Aboriginal experience. As argued in chapter 4, rather than uncritically introducing an uncanny return to eugenic times and thinking, this insistence may serve to ward off undue uses and appropriations of Indigeneity as the means of access to those resources that are mobilised within the present politico-legal context of Nativeness, such as land, education, healthcare, welfare, housing etc. This is how one should understand Robert Eggington’s insistence upon “the importance of the Dumbartung protocols to identify those who illegitimately use ‘resources earmarked for our community.’”¹³¹⁴ This is to say, this Nyoongar elder and spokesman insists upon Native genes as well as lived experience and community acceptance in the authentication of Indigeneity.

Working on the basis of temporal closures of Aboriginal identity, a strategic politics of the body is implemented to further the recovery of the Indigenous community. Thus, to the question “why a small amount of Noongar blood can make you [an Indigenous Australian], while any amount of white blood needn’t make you white,” Kim Scott answers, “It’s considered a *political* position, intended to foreground *inequalities* in our society, and particularly in our history.”¹³¹⁵ This need for strategic positioning in the

states/territories less than 4% of people were estimated to be of Indigenous origin. Victoria had the lowest proportion of people of Indigenous origin at 0.6% of the total state population. Between 2001 and 2006, the Australian Indigenous estimated resident population increased by 58,700 or 13%. The jurisdictions with the highest growth rates were Western Australia (18%), the Northern Territory (17%) and Queensland (16%) ... 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” (2006: 3-6. See Works Cited. “Population Distribution ...”).

¹³¹³ Langton 1993: 29.

¹³¹⁴ Quoted in Van Toorn 2007: 42.

¹³¹⁵ Scott & Brown 2005: 207 (my emphasis).

face of social and historical inequalities, then, may account for the fact that Indigenous Australians mobilise a part-essentialist notion of belonging to country. The performance of the sign Aboriginal in a politics of recovery may uncannily have to fall back on the very contours of the essentialist thinking that turned the Indigenous community into an ill-treated 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.’¹³¹⁶ Nettlebeck’s comment 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 current socio-political, legal and material contexts.

The above implies that a strategic employment of Indigenous identity does not only refer to the past but also to the future; it uncannily contains the seed for end times as well as new times. Indeed, current Indigenous politics of the body propose a recovery of the sign Aboriginal not as part of Western society but rewriting its very epistemology on the basis of an Australian situatedness or ontological belonging to country. Traditional Western thinking is universalist, hierarchically organised and divisive, creating categories based on Self/Other distinctions. However, Indigenous epistemology brings the configuration and mechanics of the universe back to the life-giving connections of all matter to the land—organised into a 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 organise life in horizontal relationships of mutual benefit and support, whether direct or indirect.¹³¹⁷ The land as a sacred self-governing and self-supporting sentient system calling into being a variety of interdependent life forms translates incompletely into Western thinking as environmentalist care for ecological habitats, because it does not reflect the deep spiritual notions with which Native country is imbued. Indeed, characterised by respect for all its manifestations of life and with its multiple entrance points for agency and sentience, the concept of ‘country’ undoes the Western subject-object binary in favour of the subject-subject relationship,¹³¹⁸ reminiscent of a rhizomatic organisation of knowledge and

¹³¹⁶ Nettlebeck 1996: 82. She makes this comment regarding David Malouf’s romantic inscriptions of identity into Australian space.

¹³¹⁷ Rose 2005: 295-303.

¹³¹⁸ Rose 2005: 302-3 (my emphasis).

agency.¹³¹⁹ Indeed, the postcolonising rewriting of the Australian land as country implies a levelling of binary Western thinking and is tied up with the dissolution of such discrete 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 Native and non-Native world of experience even further, and criticises strategic interpretations of a politics of the body for being equally informed by Western epistemological discourse. She writes:

Our ontological relationship to land, the ways that country is constitutive of us, and therefore the inalienable nature of our relation to land, marks a radical, indeed incommensurable difference between us and the non-Indigenous. This ontological relation to land constitutes a subject position that we do not share, and which cannot be shared, with the post-colonial subject whose sense of belonging in this place is tied to migrancy. Indigenous people may have been incorporated and seduced by the cultural forms of the colonizer but this has not diminished the ontological relationship to the land. Rather, it has produced a doubleness whereby Indigenous subjects can ‘perform’ whiteness while being Indigenous ... 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.¹³²⁰

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 Aboriginality to a different conception of identity formation lies beyond the mobilisation of subject and object, Self and Other, essence and acquisition, nature and nurture as antagonistic forces. As the current

¹³¹⁹ See Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 21. See also chapter 5, pp.262-6.

¹³²⁰ Moreton-Robinson 2003: 32.

definition of Australian Indigeneity implies, neither of the constituents of any of the binary pairs mentioned can be engaged in isolation to express identity; 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 postcolonising as well as Indigenising 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 engages respect and care for all its manifestations on a symbiotic basis of interrelatedness and interdependency. It appears there is a disposition amongst many non-Native Australians to move into 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.¹³²¹

Similarly, the renowned mainstream writer David Malouf highlights the role the literary plays in Indigenising the concept of Australianness. Thereto, he consciously chooses a vocabulary that aims to bridge between the European and Indigenous tradition. In his view, understanding Australian history becomes a matter of re-living the past through a fictionalising process that creates a D/dream experience capable of restoring the nation's spiritual economy:

...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 ... It's when you have actually been there and become a character again in that world ... The readers are then able to take all of that into their

¹³²¹ Tim Flannery, *Australia Day Address* 2002.

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. Of course dream or myth has a particular quality for us, something where we touch on very deep things but we don't ask what their meaning is. We recognise them as forces that are at work in us that we don't fully understand and whose particular importance to us is that we maybe shouldn't understand them. That's the extent to which it's a different history: it's a dream history, a myth history, a history of experience in the imagination. And I keep wanting to say societies can only become whole, can only know fully what they are when they have relived history in that kind of way.¹³²²

From an Aboriginal 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 incur in uncanny ambiguities; Malouf's re-imaginings of the Australian past have met with praise as well as resistance from mainstreamers and Natives,¹³²³ and this shows us that the process of Indigenising Official White History—by the contested New Australian History movement and in politically-engaged contemporary fiction—is not a straightforward but highly complex matter. It is obvious that mainstream Australia still has a long way to go in order to come to terms with Indigeneity as Australianness, and this is as much a practical affair as a symbolic process. Aboriginal communities enjoy more autonomy than in the past, federal legislation has seen some adjustment to Native demands and needs, and an official Apology for the Stolen Generations policy was recently offered to the First Australians. These seem steps in the right direction—or perhaps not? What has the general mainstream attitude towards and agenda of Reconciliation been over the last decade and a half?

¹³²² Daniel 1996. These remarks by Malouf relate to the agenda of his novel *Remembering Babylon* (1993).

¹³²³ Whether this novel has achieved its postcolonising aims has been a matter of academic debate—see McCredden 1999 for a good overview, and Kinnane 2001 for an analysis from the Native point of view.

7.5.2. Assimilation versus self-determination

Federal Prime Minister John Howard was voted into office for three consecutive terms from 1996 to 2008, openly vaunting and marketing an assimilationist agenda. He stubbornly refused to apologise 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 *Bringing Them Home* report. The Howard government also quickly passed the 1998 Native Title Amendment Act, profiling its reactionary thrust towards the extinction of Native Title rights in the current federal legislation.¹³²⁴ 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. ATSIC's tasks are now subsumed under the Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. All of this manifested a reactionary effort to curb the on-going demand for self-determination and self-government by the broad sway of the Indigenous community as the solution to their plight, as well as an ingrained mainstream blindness to the structural problems informing Aboriginal society's dysfunctional state of affairs. Howard's assimilative agenda towards the First Australians finally culminated in his government's military intervention in the Northern Territory on 21 June 2007. Aboriginal leader Patrick Dodson¹³²⁵ interprets the intervention as follows:

The reconciliation process gave Australia a doorway to a political settlement approach on how the modern Australian state could recognise the traditional ownership status of Indigenous people and unravel the historical layers of colonial legacy that continue to determine contemporary relationships between Indigenous communities and Australian governments and other institutions. The recent Howard Government's takeover of NT Indigenous communities demonstrates the importance of a formal process that enshrines Indigenous people and their ancient cultures into Australian nation building,

¹³²⁴ See chapter 2, pp.70-78.

¹³²⁵ "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, the Chairman of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation. He is currently the Chairman of the Kimberley Development Commission" (Altman & Hinkson 2007: 238).

especially in the Constitution. 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.¹³²⁶

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; not a state amongst other federal states but a ‘major mainland territory’, its Parliament’s legislation can be overridden by Commonwealth decision. This is precisely what happened in this politically-underdeveloped area whose Australian Aboriginal population significantly represents 32% of its total, a much higher percentage than any of the Australian states.¹³²⁷ With the excuse of creating the conditions to prevent the ongoing child sexual abuse in remote Aboriginal communities—itsself the dysfunctional outcome of relentless mainstream meddling in Aboriginal affairs—the intervention suspended local Aboriginal powers of government.¹³²⁸ Ostensibly staged as a humanitarian gesture in response to the

¹³²⁶ Dodson 2007: 21.

¹³²⁷ See footnote 1312.

¹³²⁸ Melinda Hinkson writes to this effect that “[i]n the name of protecting children, the Commonwealth announced it would introduce the following measures, to apply to all people living in remote NT Aboriginal communities:

- widespread alcohol restrictions
- welfare reforms - to stem the flow of cash going to substance abuse and to ensure funds meant for children's welfare would be used for that purpose
- enforced school attendance through linking income support and family assistance payments to school attendance, and provision of school meals for children at parents’ cost
- compulsory health checks for all Aboriginal children, to identify and treat health problems and any effects of abuse
- acquisition of townships prescribed by the government through five-year leases, including payment of “just terms” compensation
- increases in policing levels, including secondments of officers from other jurisdictions to supplement NT resources
- ground clean up and repair of communities to make them safer and healthier by marshalling local workforces through Work for the Dole improvements to housing and reform of community living arrangements, including the introduction of market-based rents and normal tenancy arrangements
- banning the possession of x-rated pornography, and auditing of all publicly funded computers to identify illegal material
- scrapping of the permit system for common areas, road corridors and airstrips for prescribed communities on Aboriginal land
- improved governance through the appointment of managers of all government business in prescribed communities.”

These measures were soon backed up by three emergency-response bills directed at putting trouble areas in the Northern Territory under Commonwealth control. The legislation was passed with bipartisan support and “enables the federal government to:

Little Children are Sacred report¹³²⁹ but sadly reminiscent of the Stolen Generation policy of absorptionist and assimilationist days,¹³³⁰ the intervention was meant to boost voter support for the conservatives in the impending federal elections as well as geared towards the imposition of a neo-liberal paradigm of Native self-help, far outdoing its official purpose. Jon Altman summarises the regressive consequences of the emergency legislation as follows:

In the Northern Territory the reforms are mandatory and affect all residents of the seventy-three prescribed communities without differentiation. All welfare will be quarantined, townships will be compulsorily leased by the Australian Government, mandatory work activities will see the marshalling of local labour through Work for the Dole, community living arrangements will be reformed, the CDEP [Community Development Employment Projects] will be abolished, and community governance arrangements will be fundamentally altered through the appointment of government business managers with unfettered emergency powers. The government has conceded that these measures are racially discriminatory, but argues that they are ‘beneficial’ so accord with the terms of the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* and the Constitution.¹³³¹

-
- 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
- excluding any person, including a traditional owner, from the land compulsorily leased” (Hinkson 2007:1-4).

¹³²⁹ Published in 2007 by the Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse.

¹³³⁰ See Dodson 2007: 85-96.

¹³³¹ Altman 2007: 311.

In short, the Howard Government's agenda sought the solution to the social breakdown affecting remote Aboriginal communities—ingrained poverty, poor education, unemployment, alcohol and drug abuse, sexual and physical violence, poor health, state and welfare dependency and so on—in its failure to assimilate into 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.¹³³²

Similarly, Patrick Dodson argues that:

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.¹³³³

It appears then that multiculturalist piece-meal engineering has not substantially alleviated the permanent situation of serious social breakdown that many remote Aboriginal communities find themselves in, and this failure paved the way for a conservative return to an assimilationist agenda. Yet, John Howard was ousted by Labor in the last federal elections of November 2007, which suggests 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 colonisation 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 about Rudd's pledge "to apologise to the Aborigines for the wrongs done to them

¹³³² Hickson 2007: 6.

¹³³³ Dodson 2007: 22.

since settlement” that “[e]veryone 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.”¹³³⁴ And indeed, a fully-sourced and funded programme for improving the sorry state of many Aborigines¹³³⁵ still remains to be formulated and put into practice, and was not attached to this highly symbolic national event. Neither has Labor rule led to the suspension of the Northern Territory Intervention; though it has softened some of its harsher aspects, it basically continues the support it had already given to the “Emergency Response” formulated under Howard’s premiership. A dark reading of these manoeuvres suggests that Rudd’s Apology was offered so as to create the adequate political climate for the intervention to continue.

One decade into the 21st century, the heritage of Labor and Conservative ‘neo-assimilationist’ rule indicates that a viable answer is not found in a levelling recognition of cultural diversity but should be focused through respect for cultural difference and all that entails in terms of active policy-making by and self-determination for the Indigenous population. Raimond Gaita links the symbolical to the practical in suggesting that,

... 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.’¹³³⁶

As to the measurable, practical benefits of Indigenous self-determination, Patrick Dodson writes:

¹³³⁴ Gaita 2007: 303.

¹³³⁵ Alexis Wright speaks of “the living hell of the lives of many Aboriginal people” (Wright 2002: 14). Note also Marcia Langton’s recent 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” (2008: 155, 158).

¹³³⁶ Gaita 2007: 304.

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.¹³³⁷

Finally, 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.”¹³³⁸ Similarly, John Sanderson questions the Howard policy of military solutions to social breakdown by placing the Northern Territory intervention in the international context of neo-liberal globalisation, which has failed to provide “a peaceful new world order.” He holds that the Twin Tower bombing 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.”¹³³⁹ 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 production mode. The longevity of the Iraq and Afghanistan occupations shows the fallacy of a strategy of moving in, deposing rulers, imposing democracy and—to use a market metaphor—leaving people to their own business. Sanderson firmly believes that:

Australia's Indigenous people have been and continue to be the victims of a similar coercive market forces approach. 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

¹³³⁷ Dodson 2007: 27-8 (my emphasis).

¹³³⁸ Rundle 2007: 37.

¹³³⁹ Sanderson 2007: 32. Sanderson was a Governor of Western Australia, currently its government Special Adviser on Indigenous Affairs, and still a high-ranking career soldier.

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.¹³⁴⁰

7.5.3. Cultural diversity versus difference

Not surprisingly, the Aboriginal scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson sees the danger of Aboriginal containment by the mainstream lurking in unsuspected corners:

In *Uncanny Australia ...* Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs (1998) argue that Australia is now postcolonial because the Indigenous population are now inserted into the national imaginary through the symbolic rendering of ‘the sacred’. They argue that this is an outcome of land right struggles and the recognition of sacred sites. 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 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.¹³⁴¹

No doubt Gelder and Jacobs meant to present a critical instance of ‘Aborigine-friendly’ mainstream scholarship against the reactionary mainstream hysteria generated by Native Title legislation. However, after twelve years of conservative backlash their study may feel infelicitously based on wishful thinking that runs the risk of re-appropriating Indigeneity for self-serving purposes; the desire to understand and respect difference threatens to reveal itself uncannily as an Aboriginalist assimilation of Otherness by

¹³⁴⁰ Sanderson 2007: 34.

¹³⁴¹ Moreton-Robinson 2003: 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” (Sanderson 2007: 35).

glossing over the material conditions that underlay unequal access to power. Thus, only three years after the publication of *Uncanny Australia*, Henry Reynolds lamented:

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 1992.¹³⁴²

Another Aboriginal academic, Marcia Langton, is also wary of the mainstream involvement in Indigenous affairs. She takes issue with progressive mainstream attitudes towards Indigeneity as follows:

I can seldom find an audience to speak to about the stranger-than-fiction situations I encounter in a deeply racist settler state that denies its own racism. It is rare to find people who respond knowingly to my tales of disturbing encounters with liberal-minded or leftist suburban Australian intellectuals who claim to support Aboriginal people and yet are entrenched in Enlightenment ways of thinking about us as savages 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

¹³⁴² Reynolds 2003: 246.

that people like myself have status that in no way derives from Australian society but from my Aboriginal cultural inheritance.¹³⁴³

Thus, Langton proves herself profoundly disappointed with the possibilities for the Australian mainstream to engage productively with cultural difference.

These critical comments from renowned Aboriginal scholars throw serious doubts on the work with Indigeneity that can be done by non-Natives. However, while only able to understand the epistemological depth of the Australian-Indigenous universe partially—if at all—one should still maintain openness to difference and respect other voices in a world where discrete cultural spaces have become a chimera. In a globalising world, we are obliged to meet and get on across cultural rifts of varying degrees of incommensurability in order to create suitable conditions for coexistence, whether we like to or not. Noel Pearson's view of Reconciliation lays 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 ... There will never be peace and reconciliation if legal rights under Mabo are denied or rendered impotent, and never again will there be an opportunity for a genuine accommodation of indigenous people within this nation ... This choice is also one which non-Aboriginal Australians must make. The country must decide whether it wants to effect a reconciliation with indigenous people, and if so, then the erosion of legal rights, and the

¹³⁴³ Langton 2001: 75-6. Professor Marcia Langton holds the Chair of Australian Indigenous Studies in the Centre 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.

denial of self determination and self government, will be a sure means of driving indigenous people inexorably towards absolute alienation.¹³⁴⁴

The relationship between contemporary mainstream politics and Indigenous affairs is undoubtedly of a complex and contradictory nature, in which victim and victimiser positions uncannily circulate through each other. Noel Pearson is a well-respected Aboriginal leader and lawyer with a long-standing and widely-recognised commitment to the Indigenous Australian cause. Yet, he played a controversial but crucial 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 development projects for remote NT Aboriginal communities commissioned through the Cape York Institute for Leadership and Policy, has been criticised by a substantial amount of Indigenous spokespeople. Indeed, John Howard reacted to Pearson's urgent appeal for immediate government action after the publication of the *Save the Children* report, and the Prime Minister consulted him rather than local Aboriginal leaders before signing the go-ahead for the intervention.¹³⁴⁵ Raimond Gaita highlights that:

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.¹³⁴⁶

Jon Altman, an expert on Indigenous economic development and policy at the Australian National University in Canberra, holds:

... there has been state failure in the hard grind of policy needed to address the deeply entrenched problem of Indigenous marginality within affluent Australia. In this environment, with a growing reference to past failure in policy and practice, the new approach advocated by Noel Pearson gained

¹³⁴⁴ Quoted in Langton 2002: 76.

¹³⁴⁵ Rundle 2007: 37, 43-5.

¹³⁴⁶ Gaita 2007: 297.

traction rapidly. Pearson's approach was appealing for many reasons besides his intellect, articulate delivery and Indigeneity. Firstly, his approach presented a break with the past, and while it identified problems with the state—in terms of neglect and inappropriate policies—Pearson was also willing to highlight the part played by Indigenous people in their own marginality. Secondly, his theoretical constructs appealed to the neo-liberalism dominating contemporary politics and the public domain. 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 favour Altman points out, however, that the implementation of Pearson's ideas in the Northern Territory through Cape York Institute programmes differs markedly from their neo-liberal interpretation and application by the Howard Government. He praises Pearson's political instinct as it is "Pearson's bold vision," which "he has marketed astutely within polity and political circles," that may ultimately "make a real difference in the Cape."¹³⁴⁷ Thus, Marcia Langton speaks 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" (Langton 2008: 156).

However, Marcia Langton, who is the Cape York Institute's chairperson as well as an academic heavyweight in Aboriginal Studies, aligns with Noel Pearson's positioning in the intervention and gives conditional support to the Howard government's decision to interfere in NT affairs. She brings traditional class and gender dichotomies into play when judging dissident Aboriginal positions in the intervention matter, blaming urban Aboriginal critics for not understanding the remote communities' living conditions. According to her analysis, it is the "sustained fantas[y] about traditional Aboriginal society ... that, until colonisation, life for Aboriginal people was peaceful and idyllic" which puts the blame on mainstream society policy for the existence of violence in

¹³⁴⁷ Altman 2007: 309-11.

remote communities.¹³⁴⁸ She also takes issue with the “virility” cult amongst 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-centred 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 Native affairs.¹³⁴⁹ Although she paints the radical character of the intervention as an “exasperated solution”, Langton acknowledges the Conservatives’ ability to react upon “the relationship between passivity, alcohol, substance abuse, and declining social norms” caused by loss of work opportunities, forced migration, welfare dependency, and unlimited access to alcohol, drugs and pornography as of the acquisition of citizenship rights in 1967.¹³⁵⁰

Not surprisingly, Langton’s challenging conclusions are harsh and dismissive on both sides of the Native/non-Native divide, and forcefully focus on the true victims and needy in the conflict:

The dominance of the ‘reconciliation and justice’ rhetoric in the Australian discourse on Aboriginal issues is a part of [a belief in the inevitability of our incapability - the acceptance of our ‘descent into hell’]. The first Australians are simply seeking relief from poverty and economic exclusion. Yet, in the last three decades, rational thinking and sound theory (such as development economics) to address the needs of Indigenous societies have been side-tracked into the intellectual dead-end of the ‘culture wars’. This has had very little to do with Aboriginal people, but everything to do with white settlers positioning themselves around the central problem of their country: can a settler nation be honourable? Can history be recruited to the cause of Australian nationalism without reaching agreement with its first peoples? Paradoxically ... [p]olitical 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-

¹³⁴⁸ Langton 2008: 154.

¹³⁴⁹ Langton 2008: 146.

¹³⁵⁰ Langton 2008: 152, 159.

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’.¹³⁵¹

From the vantage point of local involvement, Langton—as well as Pearson I would suggest—assigns blame for the marginalisation, destruction and poverty that affect the Indigenous Australian community both within and without Native society, and urges responsible behaviour on all parts, beyond traditional victim and victimiser positions and race, class and gender divisions, in overcoming these ills. In her vision, this entails looking into alleviating the pressing basic problems and needs of the ‘real’ Aboriginal underclass as a first step up to the recovery and self-determination of the Native community at large. In short, this means providing the Aboriginal community with the basic rights and services that citizenship implies for the average Australian—and still not for the middling Aborigine despite the symbolic achievement of the 1967 referendum.

7.5.4. Australianness versus Europeanness

In the face of these complexities, how can I position the research reflected in this dissertation? Concerned with the role of the Other in the process of identity formation, it addresses reconfigurations of Australianness through its exposure to Indigeneity and its manifold and varied inscriptions within the literary, but on the final count it cannot pretend to ‘reveal’ or define what Aboriginality is. As the work of an ‘uninitiated’ person, it must simply bow to the Indigenous-Australians’ 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 Otherness. 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 2 has pointed out how Freud investigated the uncanny through his theorisation of the Oedipus complex, the incest taboo, and sexual sublimation in the establishment of culture and civilisation. His analysis, however, proves disturbingly pivoted on a biased,

¹³⁵¹ Langton 2008: 161-2.

tendentious interpretation of Indigenous-Australian societies and therefore incomplete as chapter 2 and the novels analysed in this thesis show. In the light of the epistemological complexities posed by our exposure to the incommensurable worldviews of the (Native) Other, the only way to achieve politically-correct speaking positions lies in recognising that Aboriginal re/configurations of identity lay bare the always tenuous, processual nature of our Western self-definition, as it disappears into the blurring mirror image of the 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.

What the White Australian mainstream can do to truly postcolonise 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 reckon 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. 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. As many Aboriginal theorists and writers indicate, in such a framework the Indigenous right of self-definition, self-determination and self-government should figure prominently to create effective and productive policies against the vast array of inequalities that separate Native from mainstream Australia. It is only in the active provision of basic citizenship rights for Indigenous Australians—access to Native land and its resources, political power, wealth, health, education, employment etc.—that reconciliation and justice can be sought and found. In the face of the ongoing state of siege waged upon Aboriginal communities, emblematically evidenced in the Northern Territory Intervention, it remains to be seen whether such a liberating Indigenous agenda may eventually materialise 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 uncanny uncertainties provoked by a globalising world of mass migration, national dissolution and economic dislocation? The Australian case teaches us that raising defensive battlements

around Europeanness—or worse, around individual nationalities for that matter—in order to restrict access to power and resources to an already-privileged local mainstream majority offers no viable solution. Rather, such regressive essentialism is exclusionary as well as a perverse, cynical denial of cultural Otherness and common humanity 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 neo-colonial market forces on other continents—forces that replicate Europe’s colonial expansion and migration of earlier centuries and 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’¹³⁵² can never be based on a binary agenda of assimilation/exclusion of post-colonial subjects. As the Australian mainstream critic and editor John Hinkson argues:

Societies, over generations, can come to terms with their limitations. But this is not possible without engaging the deep cultural assumptions that shape ways of life. Such a quest does not come easily. It requires recognition of and respect for the real differences between societies, while never forgetting the basic humanity they share, at the same time as requiring an in-depth delving into the structures and needs implicit in differing cultural assumptions. Arguably these processes of cultural exploration were most strongly engaged in Australia during the debates and legal struggles leading up to and following the *Mabo* decision, when significant gains were made over native title by the indigenous people and their supporters. 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

¹³⁵² In Aboriginal Australia, pay-back refers to a ritualised 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 highlight that material/monetary compensation is due to disenfranchised minorities for the impact of the (neo)colonial enterprise.

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.¹³⁵³

While hard-boiled essentialist approaches to identity are doomed to failure, a strict imposition of cultural relativism will fare no better. It appears that the blind mobilisation of 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 applications of both approaches to tackle problems of ‘authenticity’, ‘originality’ and entitlement to group membership and its rights and obligations. The Australian case suggests that disempowered minorities minimally need 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 up to cultural difference in order to make cohabitation in cultural and physical (nation) spaces possible. 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 outsiders. Contradictorily, the uncanny manifestation of incommensurable difference in/on the Aboriginal 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.”¹³⁵⁴

This process of closure has negatively affected culturally-defined ‘Aborigines’ such as the authors and activists Mudrooroo, Roberta Sykes and Archie Weller.¹³⁵⁵ While they can make a claim to skin colour as a factor in identity constitution and political engagement, they may not be able to mobilise Aboriginality to these purposes—uncannily, in the Australian context Aboriginal Black is always black, but black is not necessarily Black though it may give rise to solidary action, as is prominently manifest in Roberta Sykes’ history of political engagement.¹³⁵⁶ The uncanny quality of these black

¹³⁵³ Hinkson 2007: 288.

¹³⁵⁴ Ravenscroft 1998: 80.

¹³⁵⁵ See chapter 4, sections 4.1 and 4.4 for Mudrooroo’s identity problems, and chapter 4, footnote 493 for Sykes and Weller’s cases.

¹³⁵⁶ 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 highlights 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,

authors' identitarian unfixeness draws attention to how processes of identity formation are always tenuous, in a flux and never at rest, performing on an ever-changing continuum that may nevertheless suggest and even require momentary stillness and opaqueness. This is not to reject Aileen Moreton-Robinson's postulation 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 levelling inscriptions of identity in race, class and gender terms.¹³⁵⁷

From a non-Native point of view, Aboriginal scholars' and novelists' refusal to engage 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 we, mainstream observers can(not) understand what it means to be Indigenous Australian. Spiritually we may perceive Indigeneity—as given shape through the epistemology of the Aboriginal Sacred in Postcolonising Dreaming Narrative—as an uncanny manifestation of unfathomable cultural difference; yet rationally we may also see it as a canny manifesto of a wholesome, communal and levelling inscription of human identity into the land, bound to respect and care for all life that country generates and sustains. This uncanny interface of part commensurable, part incommensurable difference allows superficial readings of Indigeneity but rejects any attempt to reach unto the ontological nature of Indigeneity unless and until—if ever—we are duly initiated to the spirituality with which the land is imbued by its Aboriginal 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 schemes of interpretation and operation.

This uncanny 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 American philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah optimistically puts it, “we don't have to agree on our values and identities to live in

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 Afro-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 remains puzzled by her origins and writes 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” (2000: 111).

¹³⁵⁷ See this chapter, p.402.

harmony, as long as we agree to make living together work.”¹³⁵⁸ Within the Australian framework, Noel Pearson’s grim observation that neither settler nor Indigenous Australians are going to disappear and that therefore “[c]o-existence remains our lot”¹³⁵⁹ speaks out to both groups’ obligation to actively participate in the process of making coexistence possible, but also reminds us of the special effort required from non-Natives in order to achieve this. Thus, Kim Scott reminds us that within the current socio-political and legal constellation inclusive forms of Australianness can be generated from within Indigeneity but not from within the mainstream.¹³⁶⁰

As many Australians lack direct contact with the Aboriginal communities and with the true nature of their entrenched difficulties to survive and thrive, alternative means of cross-cultural contact have to be sought. One simple but effective way of listening to, learning from and respecting Aboriginal Australia is through the exposure to Indigenous texts that manifest the imprint of Postcolonising Dreaming Narrative; the important literary awards conceded to Kim Scott and Alexis Wright’s fiction signal that Australian readership at large is opening up to what Indigenous authors have to say. It goes without saying that Indigenous literature has an important role to play in voicing and learning from cultural difference, in creating the ground for respectful coexistence, and thus in working towards a truly postcolonised Australia. No doubt these observations can be extended to the larger scope of Western society and minority discourses in general.

¹³⁵⁸ Quoted in Ang 2008: 230.

¹³⁵⁹ Quoted in Langton 2002: 76.

¹³⁶⁰ Scott & Brown 2005: 207; see also chapter 5, p. 70.

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