The Postcolonial Uncanny

On Reconciliation, (Dis)Possession and Ghost Stories

It is time to introduce the concept of the ‘uncanny’ and to say something about its value in relation to postcolonial Australia. This concept comes into modern thinking through Sigmund Freud’s influential essay, ‘The “Uncanny”’, an essay published in 1919, four years after Durkheim’s The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life. Freud’s primary concern is certainly with the psyche, but the essay is also about one’s sense of place in a modern, changing environment, and it attends to anxieties which are symptomatic of an ongoing process of realignment in the post-war modern world. In brief, Freud elaborates the ‘uncanny’ by way of two German words whose meanings, which at first seem diametrically opposed, in fact circulate through each other. These two words are: heimlich, which Freud glosses as ‘home’, a familiar or accessible place; and unheimlich, which is unfamiliar, strange, inaccessible, unhomely.1 An ‘uncanny’ experience may occur when one’s home is rendered, somehow and in some sense, unfamiliar; one has the experience, in other words, of being in place and ‘out of place’ simultaneously. This simultaneity is important to stress since, in Freud’s terms, it is not simply the unfamiliar in itself which generates the anxiety of the uncanny; it is specifically the combination of the familiar and the unfamiliar—the way the one seems always to inhabit the other. In postcolonial Australia, and in particular after the Mabo decision in 1992, Freud’s ‘uncanny’ might well be applied directly to those emergent (that is, yet-to-be established) procedures for determining rights over land. In this moment of decolonisation, what is ‘ours’ is also potentially, or even always already, ‘theirs’: the one is becoming the other, the familiar is becoming strange.
The value of this concept, then, is that it refuses the usual binary structure upon which much commentary on Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relations is based. We often speak of Australia as a ‘settler’ nation, but the ‘uncanny’ can remind us that a condition of unsettledness folds into this taken-for-granted mode of occupation. We often imagine a (future) condition of ‘reconciliation’, and indeed, a great deal has been invested in the packaging of this image as a means of selling it to the nation—but the ‘uncanny’ can remind us of just how irreconcilable this image is with itself. It is not simply that Australians will either be reconciled with each other or they will not; rather, these two possibilities (reconciliation; the impossibility of reconciliation) coexist and flow through each other in what is often, in our view at least, a productively unstable dynamic.

There is another, not unrelated, binary structure at work in contemporary Australia which we can also comment on. In relation to Aboriginal people, non-Aboriginal Australians can either be innocent—in the sense of not being implicated in earlier processes of colonisation, or guilty—in the sense that everyone (‘all of us’) is drawn into ‘the guilt industry’ whether they like it or not. Paradoxically, the former position casts non-Aboriginal Australians as ‘out of place’, uninvolved in those formative colonial processes; while the latter position would conceive of non-Aboriginal Australians as, in fact, too involved, too embedded in place, in the sense that every one of them, even the most recent immigrant, automatically inherits the (mis)fortunes of Australia’s colonial past. In postcolonial Australia, however, it may well be that both of these positions are inhabited at the same time: one is innocent (‘out of place’) and guilty (‘in place’) simultaneously. And this is entirely consistent with postcoloniality as a contemporary moment, where one remains within the structures of colonialism even as one is somehow located beyond them or ‘after’ them.

The topic of sacredness-in-the-midst-of-modernity can help to give the Freudian concept of the uncanny a certain concreteness in the context of modern Australia. Certainly, the Aboriginal sacred can retain a level of ‘strangeness’ and unknowability. These characteristics are produced by Aboriginal people when they speak about
the sacred as a secret thing. But the production of the sacred as a secret necessarily unfolds in a modern framework, and this framework always carries with it a level of publicity, as we will show in many of the chapters to follow. One always says to someone else that the sacred is a secret. Its secrecy is always a matter of demonstration or performance. So in the case of the Aboriginal sacred, a dialogic relation is constructed between secrecy and publicity: they relate to each other through a process of soliciting, which is to say, they enjoy each other’s company but they are also intensely wary of each other. The fortunes of the sacred at the moment are such that secrecy is always entangled with publicity to the extent that in modernity—for example, in the context of Aboriginal claims to land—they actually require each other to function, attracting and repelling each other in various ways. The dynamic which places them in relation to each other works by bringing them together then drawing them apart, and so on. This is a feature of the sacred-in-the-midst-of-modernity, which has secrecy and publicity compromise each other in order to produce the processes through which they continue to be identified as autonomous and intact. After all, secrets cannot be secrets until they are spoken about as such.

Let us imagine a structure where the Aboriginal sacred and modernity exist in such a dynamic relationship to each other. Now if the Aboriginal sacred was a passive and vulnerable thing, as Durkheim tended to suggest, then it would have a negligible effect on modernity’s familiarity with itself. But if it is an activating, soliciting thing, and if it is not just in one place but potentially all over the place—or at the very least, if its location, its destinations and its outcomes are difficult to predict—then modernity experiences the kind of ‘unfamiliar familiarity’ with itself that the uncanny precisely describes.

This ‘unfamiliar familiarity’, this ‘unsettled settledness’, is, of course, by no means specific to contemporary Australia. Certainly it is modulated here in specific, interesting ways which we shall examine through this book; but it is also a condition which is experienced only too often elsewhere in the modern world. When a nation
engages with others—indigenous people, immigrants, separatists—a sense of national identity is both enabled and disabled. The presence of ‘foreigners at home’ can intensify a nation’s investment in the idea of a national ‘self’ at the very moment at which such an idea is traumatically unsettled. Julia Kristeva’s book, *Strangers to Ourselves* (1991), is a meditation on this problematic which draws, inevitably perhaps, on the uncanny. A nation’s engagement with ‘foreigners’ leads her to offer a definitive structure for modernity built around the tension between union and separation (what in Australia would be ‘reconciliation’, and the impossibility of reconciliation). The problematic she proposes involves the fact that boundaries which might have distinguished the one from the other are no longer tenable or even recognisable. For Kristeva, a certain anxiety results which stems from the difficulty of disentangling what is one’s ‘home’ from what is not one’s ‘home’—what is ‘foreign’ or strange. As Kristeva notes, Freud’s uncanny speaks to this anxiety directly:

Freud wanted to demonstrate at the outset, on the basis of a semantic study of the German adjective *heimlich* and its antonym *unheimlich*, that a negative meaning close to that of the antonym is already tied to the positive term *heimlich*, ‘friendlily (sic) comfortable’, which would also signify ‘concealed, kept from sight’, ‘deceitful and malicious’, ‘behind someone’s back’. Thus, in the very word *heimlich*, the familiar and intimate are reversed into their opposites, brought together with the contrary meaning of ‘uncanny strangeness’ harbored in *unheimlich*.

In fact, ‘unheimlich’ is further glossed by Freud as meaning ‘withdrawn from knowledge’, obscure and inaccessible, as well as untrustworthy. We might note that these have been available characterisations of Aboriginal relations to the sacred where, as we know, secrecy is often associated (by mining companies, by government officials, etc.) with deception. But even a racist charge of deception is open to the uncanny effect since it is spoken in a structure which can never be subjected to any definitive kind of verification. If Aboriginal people say that a sacred site is here, and a non-Aboriginal ‘expert’ says that this sacred site is somewhere
else—which is the way some site disputes fall out—what you actually get is two sacred sites for the price of one! The latter claim, in other words, by no means disproves the former, nor can it ever hope to do so in any finalised way. It is not that there is no means of settling the dispute (which would amount to invoking the irreconcilable incommensurability of the differend); it is rather that the conditions of verification remain problematic, so that even after the dispute is settled a certain ‘unsettledness’ remains.

In this context, it is worth recalling that Freud himself had noted: ‘heimlich is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence’. Kristeva’s strategy is to internalise and individuate this ambivalence as a means of coping with it. We should, she suggests, come to terms with the ‘stranger in ourselves’: ‘The foreigner is within us. And when we flee from our struggle against the foreigner, we are fighting our unconscious—that “improper” facet of our impossible “own and proper”’. So Kristeva draws a connection between a ‘foreigner’ and the ‘improper’ unconscious which solicits one’s sense of a ‘proper’ self, that is, one’s sense of property, of being properly ‘in place’. It would be worth noting, however, that her advocacy of a psychic coming-to-terms with the ‘foreigner’ within us all is itself a ‘reconciliatory’ gesture which would remove the kinds of ambivalence that adhere to the uncanny. But there is no need to wish ‘improper’ anxieties away, at least in the postcolonial context, where they may well have productive effects.

Australia could also have been a ‘foreigner at home’. At least, this is the account given by Ross Gibson in his book, *South of the West: Postcolonialism and the Narrative Construction of Australia* (1992). For Gibson, Australia has been ‘a duplicitous object’ for the western world in the sense that it is both ‘demonstrably a “European” society’ (familiar) and yet also ‘fantastic and otherworldly’ (unfamiliar):

Westerners can recognize themselves there at the same time as they encounter an alluringly exotic and perverse entity, the phantasm called Australia. Westerners can look South and feel ‘at home’, but, because the region has also served as a projective screen for
European aspiration and anxiety, Australia also calls into question the assumptions and satisfactions by which any society or individual feels at home.\textsuperscript{7}

The sense of this last sentence is not quite clear, at least to us; but overall, Gibson seems to be saying that—from the externalised position of the westerner—one can imagine being ‘in place’ in Australia only through the realisation that one is also ‘out of place’. Gibson, in fact, invokes the uncanny in his description (although it is an unacknowledged invocation): Australia is ‘both strange and familiar, in other words, an enigma’.\textsuperscript{8} Yet although it is prepared to indulge this image of Australia as an ‘enigma’ to the rest of the world, when his book looks at Australia from within it figures it in a way which seems to do away with the uncanny altogether.

Gibson is usually sceptical about the mythical teleology of ‘settler’ Australia, which fantasises about ‘reconciliation’ or (using Kristeva’s word) union—where a colony ‘would gradually “belong”, it would eventually be “in place”, and it would cease to be a colony’.\textsuperscript{9} Yet from time to time he yearns for this teleology himself, especially, as it happens, when he is drawn to consider modern Australian landscape poetry. This is a literary genre which often works to produce a sense that settler Australians can be reconciled properly with place: think, for example, of the poetry (but not necessarily the politics) of Les A. Murray. Gibson reads landscape poetry as a way of securing an authentic relationship to place, but he does this only by dividing it from ‘the acquisitive process’ that relationship might (in another reading) have depended upon: ‘It is the development of this sense of subjective immersion in place, this ability to place and to think oneself in systems of settlement other than the acquisitive process of conquistadorial survey, that might be a reason for optimism as the third colonial century commences in the South Land’.\textsuperscript{10}

So it is as if the ‘immersions’ of landscape poetry can neutralise ‘conquistadorial’ practices. And this allows Gibson to concoct the optimistic possibility of being ‘at home’ in Australia at last—a possibility he had queried elsewhere in his book. His homely space, however, is not entirely bereft of otherness:
But this is not to say that everyone has redefined their understanding of their place in the landscape. The more militarist attitude, which sees the continent as a foe to be brought to rule, still ranges abroad. The submerged domes of Pine Gap are obvious talismans: white Australians’ (mythically induced) sense of the untouchability of the geographical centre has been turned to military advantage: what better place to locate unknowable technology than the arcane heartland where Nature preserve the most occult of mysteries? It is a canny [that is, not uncanny!] ploy. Whereas white Australia has traditionally looked for security from the landscape, a black magic promises to turn the world upside down by maintaining that there is security in the landscape . . . When the land becomes so otherworldly that only a ‘masonic’ class of technocrats can administer it, the conquistadorial class has taken its project to its end point . . .

This is a passage which speaks directly against acquisition: technocrats against the homeliness of landscape poets. But how is the otherness of the ‘conquistadorial class’ figured here? Uncannily, Gibson figures it through an image of a sacred site. We are directed to ‘the submerged domes of Pine Gap’ at the ‘geographical centre’ of Australia, rather than, say, to Uluru. This installation is made ‘otherworldly’; it is secretive, ‘masonic’; it uses (in a bizarre slippage into ‘primitivism’) ‘black magic’; it unsettles Gibson’s yearning for homeliness-in-the-nation. We can note that this particular ‘sacred site’ is indeed a modern one! And, in fact, it is modernity itself which produces the uncanny effect for Gibson’s ideal of settlement—a modernity which is uncomfortably underwritten by globalised, ‘militarist’ capital. Indeed, what we have with Gibson’s image of Pine Gap is a textbook case of the uncanny effect: through an act of repression, Pine Gap appears unfamiliar to Gibson precisely because it provides him with an image of modernity which is all too familiar. So Pine Gap is to Gibson what (in his account) Australia is to the rest of the world: ‘Both strange and familiar, in other words, an enigma’. Of course, if, under modernity, Australia were able to be settled through any form other than capitalism, then it might truly be an enigma. By imagining an Australia divorced from globalised capital, Gibson gives us a nostalgic structure
where one can be ‘subjectively immersed’ in the former in order to remain alienated from the latter. In this arrangement, it would not be Australia that is an ‘enigma’ to the west, but the other way around.

When Julia Kristeva thinks about one’s relations to the ‘foreign’, she wonders what kind of response might be forthcoming: ‘To worry or to smile, such is the choice when we are assailed by the strange; our decision depends on how familiar we are with our own ghosts’.12 We might well ask, how familiar is Australia with its own ghosts? Who ‘smiles’ at them and who ‘worries’ about them? This is a question of particular relevance to a nation which is involved, as Australia is, in an officially sanctioned process of reconciliation. Reconciliation is a policy which intends 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. But it is not surprising that, rather than laying things to rest, these ghosts (and the past is always ghostly here) in fact set a whole range of things into motion: arguments over land, debates over the ‘proper’ history for Australia, the bother about compensation and saying ‘sorry’ (and whether these things would settle the past down, or whether they would unleash it to the extent that the sayer—think of Prime Minister John Howard here—feels he would be subjected to a multitude of claims from which the country may never recover).

Let us turn, then, to a genre of writing—the Australian ghost story—which confronts these issues directly, tuning into the landscape in a very different way from the kind of poetry which Ross Gibson had privileged. It would seem that the ghost story in Australia is a minor genre, a marginal genre. To recall Durkheim’s telling phrase, the ghost story is ‘rudimentary’ (an ‘elementary’ form, something less than literature), and yet there is also something ‘gross’ or luxurious about it, too. These contradictory characteristics are built into the sensationalism of this genre. Many Australian ghost stories are ‘over-the-top’, hysterical, histrionic, spectacular, overflowing, meandering, ‘creaky’, indulgent: all this takes place under the constraints of a minor genre.
The haunted sites of ghost stories may appear empty or uninhabited—but they are always more than what they appear to be. These are ‘excessive’ things, extending both downwards (you will sooner or later uncover a ghost), and outwards: vertically and horizontally. Australian ghost stories generally do not respect the ‘localness’ of their sites; they are by no means constrained in this sense. Instead, they show how their sites work to influence or impress people who are always passing through, people who take the effects of those sites elsewhere when they leave (as they usually do), spreading them across the nation. The Australian ghost story, then, works by dramatically extending the influence or reach of its haunted site. It produces a site-based impression which spirals out of itself to affect others elsewhere, perhaps influencing even a nation’s sense of its own well-being. So a supposedly ‘marginal’ thing can account for far more than its marginality would suggest.

Australia has a ghost of its own, of course: the bunyip. There have been a number of stories, usually by non-Aboriginal writers, which have located the bunyip in swamps or waterholes and represented the creature as frightening, often foreboding death—as in Rosa Campbell Praed’s ‘The Bunyip’ (1891). Praed’s story, which can be designated as ‘late colonial’, gives us a creature who is heard rather than seen: this particular ghost only signifies itself aurally, as a sound. The sound works to both spread this haunted site and to confuse its origins: ‘Though we tried to move in the direction of the voice, it was impossible to determine whence it came, so misleading and fitful and will-o’-wisp-like was the sound’. The haunted site in this story, then, is all over the place. There is no explanation for the bunyip: it has no origins. Praed is simply concerned with the effect this creature has on those settlers who pass through the bush. As she so beautifully puts it in her story, in a way that exactly recalls Kristeva’s ‘smiles’ and ‘worries’, the bunyip ‘deals out promiscuously benefits and calamities from the same hand’. Let us just pause over this adverb ‘promiscuously’ for a moment. It returns us to that sense, already suggested by our consideration of the term ‘solicit’ in the context of sacredness in Chapter 1, that the haunted site, at least potentially, is an unbounded or luxurious thing which can reach across place indiscriminately. Praed’s bunyip gives
expression to these features, for there is no sense that one can refuse it; the thing takes effect and draws you in, for better or worse, whether you want it to or not.

These early settlers in Praed’s story (which seems to be set some time before the 1890s) are yet to become ‘homely’, for they have been following a ‘dray, loaded with stores and furniture for the new home to which we were bound’. In other words, these settlers are still unsettled, and their talk about ‘eerie things’ speaks directly to that condition. In a certain sense, they contribute to their haunting and their own unsettlement, since the bunyip is animated only when they talk it up (‘as we talked a sort of chill seemed to creep over us’). The creature ‘promiscuously’ emanates its aura through the bush, touching the settlers, preoccupying them and forestalling their homely impulses. Far from being ‘subjectively immersed’ in the landscape these settlers are, at least for the moment, out of place or displaced. The bunyip becomes a figure for displacement, in effect, and in this sense it has a postcolonial function.

Ghost stories are traditionally about possession; one takes possession of a haunted house and is possessed in return; all this happens on a property which is usually imagined as malevolent and overwhelming. Praed’s late colonial story is about the moment before possession, before settlement, returning to that earlier moment to anticipate the ‘improprieness’ of settlement even before it begins. Her characters, in other words, experience a moment of pre-occupation. But the postcolonial ghost story speaks not so much about possession as (dis)possession, coming as it does after the fact of settlement. It deals with post-occupational matters, which may fall out even more indiscriminately than in Praed’s story. In this context, possession is there to be negotiated by different parties, settlers and Aboriginal people alike, whereas in the traditional ghost story there is no negotiation. Indeed, in Praed’s story there is no one actually to negotiate with: there are no Aboriginal people attached to the haunted site (even though the bunyip may itself signify something ‘Aboriginal’). But in the postcolonial ghost story Aboriginal people return to the scene and, accordingly, are just as liable to be subject to hauntings as anyone else.

These features can be examined through a more recent ghost story told by an Aboriginal man to the well-known anthologist and
poet, Roland Robinson. In the first part of Percy Mumbulla’s narrative, also titled ‘The Bunyip’ (1958), this creature—which in Praed’s story had been simultaneously ‘promiscuous’ and evasive—now appears to be monogamous and attached. The bunyip belongs to a ‘clever old-man’, an Aboriginal elder. It is known or familiar rather than unknown, and it is empowering rather than unsettling. Mumbulla’s narrative suggests that the Aboriginal clever old-man derives his power directly from his bunyip:

This old fellow had a bunyip. It was his power, his moodjingarli. This bunyip was high in the front and low at the back like a hyena, like a lion. It had a terrible big bull-head and it was milk-white. This bunyip could go down into the ground and take the old man with him. They could travel under the ground. They could come out anywhere. They could come out of that old tree over there.17

The Aboriginal clever old-man and the bunyip travel together with outcomes which are already difficult to predict. It is again not an issue of causes, so much as a question of destination: there is no telling where the old man and his bunyip will end up. The description of this bunyip is worth noting and aspects of it are repeated later on: ‘That’s when I saw the bunyip. He was milk-white. He had a terrible big bull-head, a queer-looking thing’.18 The creature here is both exotic (‘like a hyena, like a lion’, ‘queer-looking’) and local; it seems to be both imported and indigenous. It is obviously associated with cattle, which would have frequented waterholes where bunyips are found, with attention drawn to its ‘milk-white’ colour. In a certain sense, then, this bunyip is produced by colonisation. It is literally postcolonial and embodies some of this moment’s features, the whiteness, the cattellike anatomy, the indiscriminate ability to turn up anywhere unannounced, and so on.

Later, the Aboriginal clever old-man argues with his sister, who was ‘as clever as he was’. They magically cause each other’s deaths through the resulting power struggle, at which point the bunyip detaches himself and continues on his travels. In the first part of the story, then, the bunyip was in a settled relationship to its Aboriginal host, albeit in the framework of an unsettled geography (mobility, unpredictable outcomes, etc.). It leaves only when that settled relationship breaks down through the mutually inflicted deaths of
the old man and his sister, deaths which the bunyip seems helpless to prevent. In the second part of the story, the bunyip is unleashed and in the process takes on an even more active function. At one point, he arrives unannounced at Percy Mumbulla’s family home:

My old dad was smoking his pipe by the chimney. Mum heard the bunyip coming, roaring. The ground started to shake. He was coming closer. He came out of the ground underneath the tank-stand. Went over to the chimney and started rubbing himself against it. He started to get savage. He started to roar. Mum told Dad to go out and talk to him in the language, tell him to go away, that we were all right.

Dad went out and spoke to him in the language. He talked to him: ‘We are all right. No one doing any harm. You can go away’ . . . Every time Dad spoke to him, he’d roar. My old-man was talking: ‘Everything is all right. Don’t get savage here’.19

The narrative shows how this second Aboriginal man is now obliged to negotiate with this creature, to calm him down. The bunyip needs to be told that no one is ‘doing any harm’ to this family, and that as a consequence his powers are not required. This Aboriginal family, in other words, does not want to play host to this bunyip, which now functions as an unwanted guest in the sense that (much like modern paternalistic bureaucracies, for example) its concern for the family is drastically misplaced. We might even say, out of place: this bunyip has an ‘ unhomely’ effect on what is clearly a ‘homely’ (that is, domesticated) scene. This is shown in the story by having the bunyip appear to have become ‘primitive’—a feature which in this context unsettles this Aboriginal couple, and they send it away. At the same time, as we have noted, the descriptions of this bunyip draw attention to the creature’s modern characteristics: far from being ‘primitive’, it is quite literally an introduced or imported species.

A number of contradictions are thus mobilised in this story. The bunyip is a ‘milk-white’ thing that is metaphorically connected to cattle, those very creatures that signify the dispossession of Aboriginal people as cattle-based properties expanded across the country. And yet a creature which is so animated by colonisation is nevertheless, initially at least, shown to contribute to Aboriginal
empowerment. Later on, however, the creature is unleashed, becoming wilder, more ‘savage’, producing not empowerment so much as unsettlement. This savagery affects not the white settlers, as the bunyip had in Praed’s story, but Aboriginal people: the narrator’s homely mother and father. In fact, as we have suggested, this bunyip now quite literally has an unhomely character: turning up unannounced at their homestead, roaring wildly, suggestively rubbing himself up against the chimney, and so on. The creature itself is highly unsettled, highly mobile, marauding, his whereabouts now even more difficult to predict than before: ‘He travels around, up and down the coast . . . He’s even been seen in Victoria, at Lake Tyers Mission’.²⁰ So the second part of this strange story unleashes the bunyip to produce unsettling effects, not on whites this time, but on Aboriginal people. This seems to be because it now signifies two contradictory things: the ‘primitive’, from which this modern, homely Aboriginal couple has dissociated itself; and the postcolonial which, precisely because it is a modern thing, shakes up (that is, solicits: the sexuality implicit in this word is evident in the bunyip rubbing himself up against the chimney) the Aboriginal couple’s home under the pretext of concern and demands their attention. Of course, there is no essential contradiction here: the modern can indeed seem ‘savage’ enough, although this no doubt depends on who is looking at it. This couple are thus caught in the middle of this contradictory movement between the ‘primitive’ and the postcolonial. It unsettles them, certainly; but we should pay attention to the way in which this Aboriginal couple engage with the bunyip as a matter of course. If nothing else, the later part of this strange story shows these Aboriginal characters keeping their place, and their sense of place, through direct negotiation.

We have said that the Australian ghost story is a minor or marginal genre. Australian writers and film-makers have not yet spectacularised this kind of story, as the United States has, through big-budget movies such as Poltergeist II: The Other Side (1986), which is all about a settler family inhabiting a new house built upon an apparently empty site that turns out to be an Indian burial ground, a site which is reanimated in order to move the family on (but where to?). Nevertheless, there have been several quite recent and
significant interventions in the genre, two of which we would like to discuss in some detail: Tracey Moffatt’s *BeDevil* (1993), and Margot Nash’s *Vacant Possession* (1996). Both of these have been prize-winning films: *BeDevil* won an award for best sound at the Festival of Fantastic Cinema in Barcelona and was selected for Un Certain Regard in the 1993 Cannes Film Festival; while *Vacant Possession* won the Special Jury Prize at the 1996 Creteil Women’s Film Festival. They are both films about hauntings, and we use them here mostly as points of contrast in our contemplation of the troubled entanglements of possession and dispossession, settlement and unsettlement.

Nash’s film shows its non-Aboriginal protagonist, Tessa, returning as an adult to her childhood home in Botany Bay, an ‘original’ place of Australian settlement. The film focuses on this now dilapidated and abandoned family home and the traumas that unfold when she returns there after her mother’s death. People ceaselessly pass through the house during Tessa’s stay; it is an ‘open’ place, full of visitors, ghosts and memories, some of them uninvited, some of them calamitous. But the ghosts, in particular, are largely self-made, stemming from Tessa’s personal anxieties about the unfinished business of the past. As an adolescent girl she had fallen pregnant to an Aboriginal boy, Mitch, who had lived nearby. Her racist father violently intervened in their affair, shooting and wounding Mitch and driving Tessa away from the family home. The film then works towards its climax during her return to the home much later on as an older woman. Her father arrives unannounced, rather like the bunyip in Mumbulla’s story. There are other guests, too: Millie, an Aboriginal girl from next door, and Tessa’s sick white cat, too obviously named ‘Captain Cook’. Millie, Tessa and her father sit down together for a meal. The traumatic histories of nation and family are drawn together around the table, and the consequences are nothing less than Gothic: a tempestuous storm erupts to shake the very foundations of the family home in Botany Bay. The unlikely trio (the cat remains upstairs) takes shelter in the cellar, during which time father and daughter, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal neighbour, confront and lay to rest the ghosts of their past. The house is blown away in the tempest, as if dispossession must be shared equally in order for Tessa to achieve a ‘proper’
homecoming. The cat, Captain Cook, dies during the storm and is
later buried, signifying the successful transition into a suitably post-
colonial sensibility.

Nash’s film shows how Tessa becomes increasingly reconciled
to the people and the place she left behind. Indeed, reconciliation is
precisely what this film is all about: it speaks quite self-consciously
to the national condition, using Tessa’s homestead as an image of
Australia itself. The ghosts of the past unsettle only in order (quite
literally, since the characters are down in the cellar) to produce the
kind of ‘subjective immersion’ that Ross Gibson had found in
modern Australian landscape poetry, which then serves as the
necessary prerequisite for reconciliation. Let us make this point
clearer: reconciliation, as it is conceived in this film, rests on a non-
Aboriginal character returning home in order to become both
immersed and dispossessed: to become homely and homeless at the
same time (a strange entanglement also charted in a recent book
about the loss of one’s home by the Australian historian, Peter
Read). That is, this non-Aboriginal character is reconciled by
becoming ‘Aboriginal’ in a postcolonial sense: immersed in the
landscape, but dispossessed of property: all in the frame of Botany
Bay (un)settlement. Indeed, Tessa’s Aboriginal neighbours provide
the means by which this familial form of reconciliation occurs: they
are facilitators in this respect, enabling the kind of individualised
coming-to-terms Julia Kristeva had advocated in Stranger to
Ourselves. The smooth, reassuring jazz music score keeps this
theme intact: everyone finally gets on together, in this ultimately
untroubled (the storm finally blows over) fantasy of homely co-
habitation through a dispossession everyone can share.

Tracey Moffatt’s BeDevil works somewhat differently. On the
whole, this film—which presents three quite separate ghost stories—
was reviewed in a perplexed way. According to Ronin Films’ pub-
licity flyer (wittingly or unwittingly) this is a film ‘where the
unexplained happens’ rather than the unexpected, a comment
which set the tone for BeDevil’s reception. In particular, it was seen
to be indulgent and unnecessarily obscure. Unlike Poltergeist II, for
example, these stories did not privilege the explanation of the
hauntings; and unlike Vacant Possession, they did not even seem to
offer a coherent narrative about the hauntings. It is worth noting
that Moffatt, an Aboriginal film-maker, did not seem particularly interested in reanimating some kind of precolonial imaginary as Rosa Praed had done; nor did she return us to the site of colonial trauma to confront the past and lay the ghosts to rest. Indeed, the point about her film is that all the ghosts are modern and, far from being laid to rest, they continue to flourish under modern conditions.

The first story, called ‘Mr Chuck’, focuses on a swamp haunted by the ghost of a black American soldier from World War II. The second story, ‘Choo Choo Choo Choo’, refers back to the ghost of a young white girl killed on a railway track. The third story, ‘Lovin’ the Spin I’m In’, shows a townscape haunted by a young Aboriginal couple who broke with traditional law in order to marry. In each of these stories there is again little interest in how the ghosts came to be where they are, or even in how they came to die. The interest is almost completely in the effects they have on those nearby or on those passing through. In the process, the issue of possession is never fully resolved: these are ghost stories which refuse the fantasy of a fully embodied reconciliation.

All three of the stories go on to show the ‘modern-ness’ of conditions which build up around these haunted sites. In ‘Mr Chuck’, a cinema is built upon the swamp which contains the body of the dead black American soldier. The bubbling swamp looks like it might well contain a bunyip, but the emphasis now is solely on the ghost’s introduced qualities (the black American soldier does not belong; he was just visiting), not its indigenous qualities. We can very well see this cinema on a swamp as another version of Ross Gibson’s militarist Pine Gap in that it certainly seems to activate an aberrant form of ‘black magic’ in the country! This cinematic story thus self-consciously puts cinema itself in the frame of modernity, and in the frame of ‘elemental’ effects which can be passed on (to the viewer). Cinema and ghosts are entangled together here, in other words; and for Moffatt in particular, who relies on noise and music and choreography rather than dialogue, film certainly does work as a highly affective (we might even say, recalling Durkheim again, a luxuriant or indulgent) form of media.

Moffatt’s ghost story also looks at the ability of a haunted site to reach out far beyond its otherwise limited domain. At one point,
as a means of closing a white woman’s narrative of the events, the camera relocates itself to rise up into the air to present a number of wide-screen panoramic landscape shots showing ‘settled’ Australians at their leisure: at the beach, riding bicycles, playing cricket, and so on. The story thus overflows its boundaries, giving a view of the modern ‘nation’ at play—after which it then returns to the ‘localness’ of the haunted site and the cinema which has been built upon it. The movement away from the site and towards the ‘nation’ then back to the site again, works to implicate the one in the other. This is the uncanny effect of the ghost story, since it puts the haunted site into a ‘familiar’ location and in doing so it makes that location appear strange. This produces an equation for ghost stories which we can list as follows: the site is (not) the nation. The point would distinguish this film from Nash’s *Vacant Possession*, which is all too ready to make Tessa’s homestead a thing of national significance. Moffatt’s film, on the other hand, suggests a resemblance and refuses to allow that resemblance to settle. There is a striking contrast between the introverted traumas of the haunted swamp and the innocent fun of Australians-at-their-leisure. Those Australians are allowed to go about their business in an unpreoccupied state of bliss. But let us draw attention to the musical sequence which accompanies the camera as it rises into the air. In contrast to the smooth, seamless jazz score which accompanies Nash’s film the music here is sharp and shrill, and in the background, almost inaudible, are the sounds of chains being rattled and a man shouting: ‘Get up!’ This is a rare moment in *BeDevil*, when there is actually an affective connection back to colonialism and colonial trauma, involving the forced clearing of Aboriginal people away from land that is now being enjoyed by these modern, leisured Australians. Obviously, it works to undercut the innocence and the familiarity of that panoramic sequence of non-Aboriginal settlers at play. But at the same time, it remains as a background feature of that sequence which you can very nearly not hear. The innocence of the sequence is almost preserved, but not quite. We can return to our earlier point about the enmeshing of innocence and guilt, since the sequence identifies postcolonial settlement through the mutuality of these positions: that the leisured or ‘luxurious’ activity of modern Australians is played out in a postcolonial field in which
implication can be cast both ways (depending, of course, on one’s ‘position’, on what one hears).

The central character in this ghost story is an Aboriginal boy who is drawn to the cinema on the swamp. It seems at first as if he is attracted by the cinema alone, enthralled by its modern offerings. Indeed, cinema looks as if it functions as an image of modernity here. It signifies leisure and luxury, for example—it is full of confectionery, which the boy greedily devours—and it seems utterly oblivious to the ghost bubbling away beneath its surface. At the same time, the film brings the cinema and the ghost together: the modern always brushes against the elemental. The Aboriginal boy breaks into the cinema, climbing in through the window; soon afterwards, he falls through the wooden floor to touch the swamp with his foot, whereupon the ghost rises to lick him and spit at the camera (which is about as far as ‘subjective immersion’ takes us in this ghost story). So elemental forces rise in this film, but not to blow the building away as they had done in *Vacant Possession* in order then to produce a ‘proper’ mode of settlement. Rather, the building is solicited. Its boundaries are transgressed through a sequence of incursions which bring the Aboriginal boy and the ghost together through the very structure of a modern building. In this sense, ‘Mr Chuck’ is a story about inhabitation, as opposed to co-habitation. It does not require the cinema to be obliterated because it knows that modernity is always there, enthralling in its own way. But it does suggest that, even so, modernity is never fully in possession of itself. The story does not offer a fantasy of loss or dispossession in order for us all then to resemble each other; rather, it tells us that modernity is in a state of (dis)possession, never lost to itself but never properly secure either.

We have already mentioned one way in which the ghostly effects of the stories in *BeDevil* spread beyond themselves. Another way this happens is by having the stories told by many different characters: Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, indigene and immigrant. The film seems to carry with it a multicultural agenda which demonstrates that knowledge about ghosts is mobile: it travels, like gossip. Narrators often talk about a haunted site from somewhere else, from a suburban home, for example. In ‘Choo Choo Choo Choo’, we only hear about the haunted railway siding after the
Aboriginal woman has travelled to another site with her friends. So the effects of the hauntings are spread, both across cultures and across place: the sites, in other words, spiral out of their location even as they remain where they are. This means that it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish between those who pass by and those who get drawn in—between, once again, the innocent and the implicated.

We can see this feature most clearly in the last story, ‘Lovin’ the Spin I’m In’. It begins with two transnational property developers coming into town to negotiate a deal to turn a supposedly ‘disused’ and unoccupied warehouse into a casino—a familiar enough narrative in many of Australia’s cities. But the warehouse is inhabited by Emelda, a Torres Strait Islander, and the ghosts of her dead son and his lover. Now Emelda and the two ghosts are already dispossessed: the lovers had, through their elopement, violated traditional law and were banished from their traditional land, and Emelda follows them. So the warehouse is both their place and not their place (since they are ‘out of place’): in this sense, all three Torres Strait characters are already diasporic and modern. An equally diasporic group, a Greek migrant family, are Emelda’s neighbours and landlords. The Greek mother narrates part of the story, and her narration helps to establish her son’s later attraction to the warehouse—much like the Aboriginal boy’s attraction to the cinema in ‘Mr Chuck’. The warehouse, then, is a place of pre-occupation: it draws people in. The property developers arrive expecting the building to be demolished, but it remains standing and inhabited in a way which troubles the premise of vacant possession that their development plans depend upon. Emelda is finally driven out of the warehouse, but in her absence the ghosts of her son and his lover become restless. They entice the dreaming Greek boy into the building, enthraling him with the passion of their relationship. As the ghostly lovers dance the building appears to ‘overheat’; the boy’s father, Dimitri, is summoned out of his bed to investigate and at the moment of climax, the property speculators return, only to be frightened away by what they encounter.

Again, the building remains in this story: it is never demolished for the sake of a fantasy about reconciliation outside the frame of settlement. But the building remains in order to be solicited by
conflicting desires. The story seems to entangle Aboriginal (dis)possession, the enthrallment of the Greek boy’s erotic waking dream and the disdainful acquisitive pragmatics of off-shore development interests. The uncanny effect here is that (dis)possession becomes the shared feature, not reconciliation. The flow of this effect is by no means one-way. Certainly, capital produces further, traumatic dispossessions (and in this story, Emelda is once again moved on); but the pre-occupied site unsettles the interests of capital in return. The final image of ‘Lovin’ the Spin I’m In’ seems to reflect this, with the property developers frantically trying to flee the scene, their car spinning around on its axis always apparently about to leave but still held by the force of the haunting.

We have wanted to highlight the genre of the Australian ghost story because of its potential in relation to the uncanny and in relation to the fortunes of a modern, postcolonial nation. We can think of this genre in terms of an entangled kind of haunting, which gives expression to a sense of (dis)possession for both Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people alike. And yet that word ‘alike’ does not properly speak to the effects of this entanglement: it is not just a question of resemblance or sameness (‘all of us’), just as it is not always a question of difference. ‘Ghosts’ simply could not function in a climate of sameness, in a country which fantasises about itself as ‘one nation’ or which imagines a utopian future of ‘reconciliation’ in which, as Nash’s film would have it, all the ghosts have been laid to rest. But neither can they function in a climate of nothing but difference, where the one can never resemble the other, as in a ‘divided’ nation. A structure in which sameness and difference solicit each other, spilling over each other’s boundaries only to return again to their respective places, moving back and forth in an unpredictable, even unruly manner—a structure in which sameness and difference embrace and refuse each other simultaneously: this is where the ‘ghosts’ which may cause us to ‘smile’ or to ‘worry’ continue to flourish.
22 Ibid., p. 193.
23 Ibid., p. 194.
24 Ibid., pp. 179 and 180.
25 Ibid., p. 188.
26 In the 1992 Mabo decision the High Court of Australia found in favour of Eddie Mabo’s claim that the 1879 annexation of the Torres Strait was unlawful and in no way extinguished his customary ownership. This decision consolidated into the Native Title Act (1993).
27 Tacey, Edge of the Sacred, p. 138.
28 Ibid., p. 206.
29 Durkheim, The Elementary Forms, p. 8.
30 Tacey, Edge of the Sacred, p. 160.
31 Ibid., p. 148.
32 ‘Racism row distracts Liberals’, Age, 28 February 1996.
33 Ibid.
34 ‘Race to the polls raises questions of Katter’s “racist” remarks’, Age, 28 February 1996.
36 For an account which prefers ‘shame’ to ‘guilt’, see ‘Shame of the nation’, Age, 28 August 1995.
39 Williams, ‘Dominant, residual, and emergent’, p. 122.

2 The Postcolonial Uncanny

2 J. Kristeva, Strangers to Ourselves, pp. 171–3.
3 Ibid., p. 182.
5 Ibid., p. 347.
6 Kristeva, Strangers to Ourselves, p. 191.
7 R. Gibson, South of the West: Postcolonialism and the Narrative Construction of Australia, p. x.
8 Ibid., p. xii.
9 Ibid., p. 72.
10 Ibid., p. 18.
11 Ibid., pp. 91–2.
12 Kristeva, Strangers to Ourselves, p. 191.
14 Ibid., p. 103.
15 Ibid., p. 105.
16 Ibid., p. 106.
3 The Sacred (in the) Nation

1 K. Maddock, ‘Metamorphosing the sacred in Australia’, p. 213.
2 Ibid., p. 215.
3 Ibid., pp. 216–17.
4 Maddock notes that Ronald Berndt had a different view of sacredness, focusing on its ‘derivation’, rather than on the practices of exclusion which surrounded it: ibid., p. 217.
5 Ibid., p. 226.
6 K. Maddock, Your Land is Our Land: Aboriginal Land Rights, p. 131.
7 Ibid., p. 133.
8 Ibid., p. 148.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid., p. 150.
11 Ibid., p. 151.
12 Ibid.
14 Ibid., p. 100.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid., p. 98.
17 S. Muecke, Textual Spaces: Aboriginality and Cultural Studies, p. 17.
18 Ibid., p. 9.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid., p. 137.
23 AMIC supports government policies which promote ‘multiple land use’ as opposed to ‘single interest’ land use. Ibid., p. 3.
24 We acknowledge that the Minerals Council of Australia has changed direction in the way it manages issues affecting the mining industry and may no longer hold the views expressed in the 1990 Shrinking Australia document.
25 ‘If we get MABO wrong. We'll all lose, again’, p. 9.
28 In line with the modern unsettlement of the bond between language and place, we need not go along with AMIC’s tendency to imagine that its own interests exactly
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